



A woman and children walk through a drought-stricken rice field in Cebu, Philippines, in April 2016. (CNS/Reuters/Jay Rommel Labra)

Joseph Opoku Gakpo

[View Author Profile](#)

Cornell Alliance for Science

[View Author Profile](#)

## [\*\*Join the Conversation\*\*](#)

October 12, 2020

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)



**Editor's note:** This story originally appeared at [Cornell Alliance for Science](#) and is republished here as part of Covering Climate Now, a global journalism collaboration strengthening coverage of the climate story.

The world's poor and marginalized people are suffering the most from climate change impacts, though they contribute the least to the carbon emissions that are driving global warming, according to new research by Oxfam.

The 3.1 billion people who make up 50% of the world's poorest population generate just 7% of the cumulative emissions that are harming the planet, the Oxfam research shows. Meanwhile, the 63 million people who make up the world's richest 1% generate more than double that amount, or 15% of the total.

"Over the past 20 to 30 years, the climate crisis has been fuelled and our limited global carbon budget squandered in the service of increasing the consumption of the already affluent, rather than lifting people out of poverty," the [report, jointly published](#) with the Stockholm Environment Institute, noted.

"The two groups that suffer most from this injustice are those least responsible for the climate crisis: poorer and marginalized people already struggling with climate impacts today, and future generations who will inherit a depleted carbon budget and a world accelerating towards climate breakdown," the report observed.

Former Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon noted in a comment on the report that it "shows once again that to tackle climate change we must fight for social and economic justice for everyone. My indigenous peoples have long borne the brunt of environmental destruction, and now is the time to listen, to integrate our knowledge and to prioritize saving nature to save ourselves."

The data show emissions by sub-Saharan Africa account for less than 1% of the total. Yet the African continent is already bearing the brunt of negative climate change impacts, Sulemana Issifu, director of research at the Centre for Climate Change and Food Security, told the Alliance for Science.

"Climate change threatens the very existence of humanity," Issifu said. "Although industrialization in Africa is very low, other models have shown that if climate change becomes very severe, Africa stands the chance to be the greatest casualty."

African agriculture is already being adversely affected by heavy downpours that result in flooding, as well as drought — both of which could be consequences of climate change, he observed. Climate change is also promoting the spread of pests on farms across the continent, Issifu said.

"I will appeal to the developed and industrialized countries that they should lead the charge in the fight against climate change," Issifu added. "Otherwise, Africa, Southern America and Asia will be hardest hit. So, we can only appeal to them."

Between 1990 and 2015, the richest 5% (about 315 million people) accounted for over a third (37%) of the total growth in emissions, the report noted. The richest 10% (about 630 million people) accounted for 46% of the total emissions growth — only marginally less than the 49% contributed by the middle 40%.

Advertisement

The poorest 50% barely increased their consumption emissions at all. The total increase in emissions by the richest 1% was three times more than the total increase in emissions by the poorest half of the population.

The richest 10% accounted for one-third of the carbon emissions that scientists estimate will cause the 1.5 C temperature rise, triggering catastrophic irreversible climate change if unchecked, while the poorest half of humanity emitted just 4%.

The report, titled "Confronting Carbon Inequality," made a number of recommendations to help deal with the situation. They include:

- Setting science- and equity-based national targets to reduce carbon emissions from consumption, as well as production;
- Incorporating principles of social dialogue at all levels to ensure that the voices of workers in affected industries, women and low-income and marginalized groups are heard in designing just transitions to an economy that keeps global heating below 1.5 C and a society that enables all its members to thrive;
- Imposing punitive measures against the rich for their role in polluting the environment, with the revenues invested in public infrastructure that benefits the masses.

"Taxes or bans are more appropriate measures to curtail luxury carbon consumption of items like SUVs and high-end sports cars, or frequent business-class and private jet flights," the report stated. "Alternatively, public investment, such as in energy efficiency improvements in affordable housing, is more appropriate to improve footprints associated with home heating, to avoid regressive impacts on lower income households," the report stated.

Issifu called for a change in behavior not only by the rich, but by the poor as well.

"Human consumption behavior is a major accelerator of climate change," he said. "It is true that the lifestyle of the rich is a major accelerator. But the poor also have a role to play. ... For example, government is putting a ban on importation of more than 10-year-old vehicles in Ghana and the poor are protesting. Government wants to ban plastics and the poor are protesting. So, if we begin to apportion the blame, we will not get anywhere. So, I will say behavior of human beings in general should change."

Earlier this week, South Africa President Cyril Ramaphosa called for action to stem the impact of climate change in a statement he made to the 75th United Nations General Assembly.

"We have no choice but to work together to address climate change," Ramaphosa said. "As we rebuild in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have an opportunity to place the global economy on a low-carbon, resilient development path. We must advance the principles of the green and circular economies, not just for the sake of environmental sustainability but because of the opportunities for job creation and economic growth. The global recovery effort must place climate change adaptation, mitigation and support at its center."