



# Aviation: A Matter of Climate Justice



## WHAT IS CLIMATE (IN)JUSTICE?

**Climate justice requires a transformation of our unjust global systems - and privileged industries like aviation must be among the first we change.**

We are living in times of deep ecological and climate injustice. **Those who have contributed the least to the climate crisis are already suffering the most from its consequences.** Without urgent action this will only get worse. Those who started using fossil fuels and benefited most must be the first to halt their climate-wrecking pollution - while also supporting low-income countries in transitioning away from fossil fuels and to simultaneously adapt to the increasingly frequent and severe impacts of climate breakdown.

Climate justice must be much more than sharing efforts to reduce emissions and financing adaptation. Achieving climate justice requires societies to prioritise a good life for all above profits for the few. Climate justice must be planetary justice where we recognise the rights of all beings and the entire living planet, as well as acknowledge the **historic responsibility** for the climate crisis and the **deep inequalities** of the current system. This also implies struggles against all forms of discrimination based on gender, origin, race, class, religion, disability or sexual orientation.

# WHO IS RESPONSIBLE AND WHO PAYS?

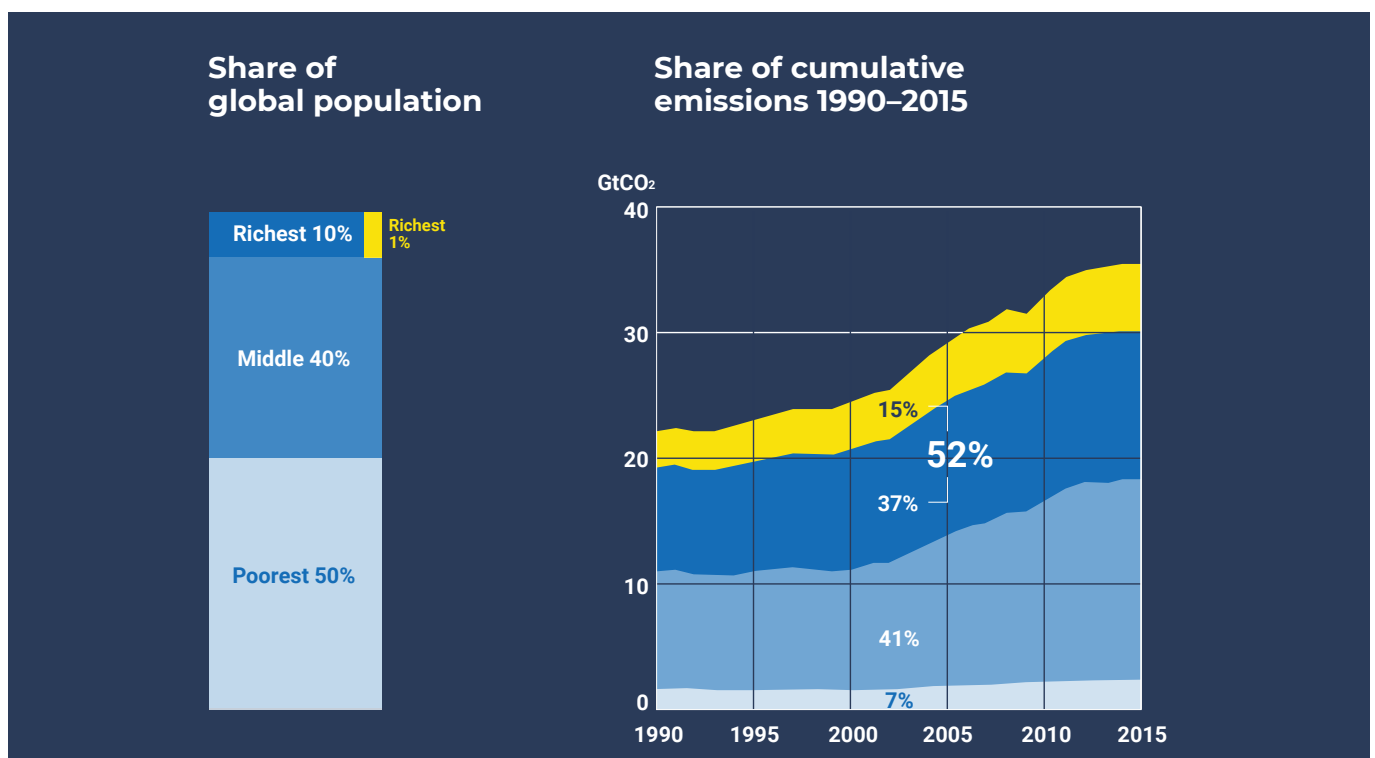
From a climate justice perspective, responsibility for emissions must be measured in terms of cumulative historical emissions, not annual flows. **As of 2015, the Global North countries have exceeded their "fair share" of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 92%.**<sup>1</sup> Almost two-thirds of climate pollution to date can be traced back to 90 major corporations, many owned by private shareholders based in the Global North, such as Chevron, Peabody and Shell.<sup>2</sup>

Carbon inequality and climate and environmental injustices are ever present. Disadvantaged, vulnerable and marginalised groups suffer far more from the climate crisis and its consequences than the wealthy sections of society, despite the former contributing least to it. Meanwhile, it is often those who also suffer from other forms of discrimination. This includes groups such as women, people of colour, indigenous peoples, economically deprived communities and those on the frontlines of fossil fuel extraction and climate colonialism. This is true in several ways:

1. **They are more often excluded from the benefits that come from burning oil, coal and gas and suffer more from the side effects of exploitation.** In other words, wealthy, white men fly and drive cars the most.<sup>3</sup> It is also predominantly men who run oil companies and rake in their profits.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, economically deprived communities and people of colour are more likely to live next to refineries, polluting airports or busy roads. Indigenous lands often become "sacrifice zones", which are areas destroyed for the extraction and processing of fossil resources.

2. These populations are **more affected by the long-term consequences of global heating**, such as water shortages or crop failures.<sup>5</sup> They also often do not have the financial or other resources required to adapt to increasingly hostile environmental conditions brought on by global heating.
3. **The climate crisis is an amplifier of existing inequalities, problems and conflicts.**<sup>6</sup> In areas where conflicts ignite over resources and water, living conditions frequently deteriorate most dramatically for vulnerable groups and communities.
4. It is also marginalised groups who suffer from the direct **impacts of false solutions to the climate crisis.** Examples for this are indigenous communities being driven off their land for offset projects or economically deprived communities having their livelihoods threatened due to land grabs for agrofuel production.<sup>7</sup>

How much climate pollution an individual causes depends above all on their income and wealth. The world's **richest 10%** are responsible for **52% of all climate pollution**. The **poorer half** of the world's population caused **only 7%** of all emissions between 1990 and 2015.<sup>8</sup> While the latter's share of emissions is associated with essential needs such as food and heating, the excess emissions of the richest come from luxury consumption such as big cars and flights – emissions which are accelerating.



# AVIATION AND CLIMATE INJUSTICE

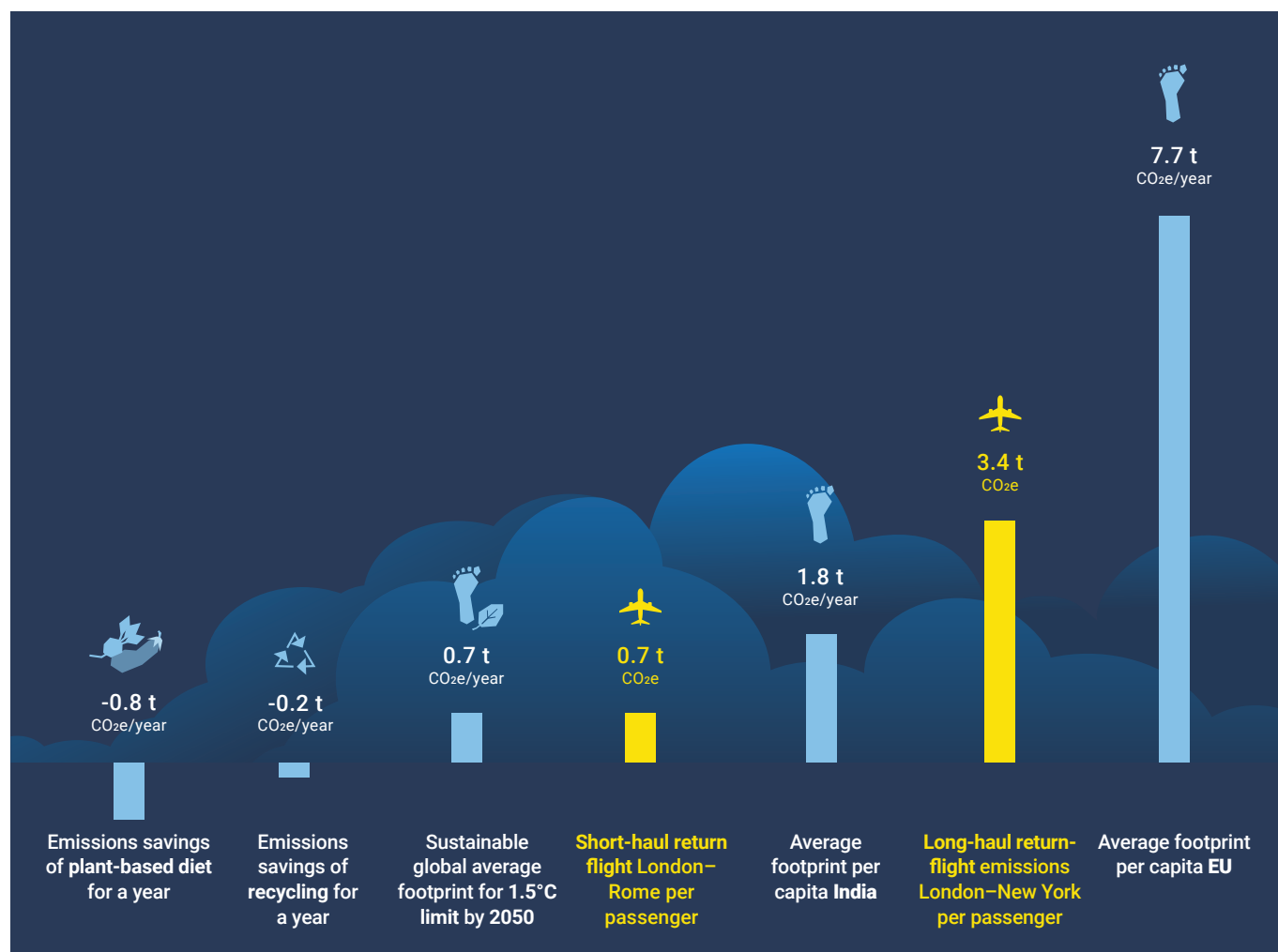
**Flying is one of the gravest examples of climate injustice.** Just taking one return flight from London to New York (3,4t CO<sub>2</sub>e) exceeds the individual sustainable carbon footprint for a whole year by 5 times!<sup>9</sup> **This means it is impossible to live a 1.5 degree lifestyle and fly**<sup>10</sup>.

At the same time, the **most vulnerable** people have an **annual footprint far lower than one long distance flight.** E.g. the average annual carbon footprint of a person living in India (1,8t CO<sub>2</sub>e) is nearly half of a return flight from London to New York.

**Only a small minority of the world's population flies** at all: in 2018, only 2-4% of the world's population flew interna-

tionally, about 80% have never flown at all and only 1% of the world's population is responsible for half of all aviation emissions. This small minority is also the **wealthiest** one. The wealthiest top 10 % use 75 % of air transport energy.<sup>11</sup>

One attempt by the industry and consumers to legitimise aviation growth and flights is to rely on the **"offsetting"** of flight emissions, that means paying for carbon compensation programs often based in the Global South. In fact, offsets often lead to new injustices (e.g. cause human rights and environmental problems in poorer countries)<sup>12</sup>, don't really reduce emissions<sup>13</sup>, divert attention away from reduction efforts and legitimise business as usual. They are, to sum up, a **license to pollute.**



# WHAT IS NEEDED FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE?

Climate action must tackle these inequalities and create opportunities for a good life for all! There is no way around this: **Climate justice is only achieved by a transformation, both local and global, of how we live together on this planet, how we make decisions, work, produce, consume, and how we understand our relationship between each other as well as to the natural world.**

The countries, corporations and citizens in Europe, North America and other regions that have the greatest historical responsibility for the climate crisis must take the lead in rapidly reducing their emissions. But more so, existing ecological and climate debts must be repaid in order to repair the losses and damages that have already taken place, even if no amount of money in the world can undo the damage. This means, among other things, that financial reparations by states and corporations in the North who have been profiting from the destruction of nature, livelihoods and futures, must be paid to communities in the South

for whom climate break-down is now an everyday reality. **Reparations must go beyond the financial** and include technology transfers, patent waivers and debt cancellation for the most vulnerable countries as well as policies that would respond to the displacement caused by accelerated global heating and its consequences.

Necessary changes and steps to tackle the climate crisis and adapt to it should not be imposed from above. Genuinely inclusive and democratic processes are needed and disadvantaged groups must be at the heart of these processes in order to remedy historical power imbalances and discrimination. And this is not only about humans. All sentient and non-sentient entities are part of our planet and therefore part of us: whether animals, plants, rivers or mountains. They too have a right to exist. **The goal of all this is planetary justice, which gives every living being on our planet the opportunity to live a good life.**

## END NOTES & LITERATURE

<sup>1</sup> Hickel (2020): Quantifying national responsibility for climate break-down. <http://bit.ly/3XQFGTh>

<sup>2</sup> Climate Accountability Institute (n.d.). [bit.ly/CAICarbonMajors](http://bit.ly/CAICarbonMajors)

<sup>3</sup> EIGE (2012): Gender Equality and Climate Change. <http://bit.ly/3YJ4GeX>

<sup>4</sup> Catalyst (2022): Women in Energy: Gas, Mining, and Oil (Quick Take). <https://bit.ly/3JdHiQZ>

<sup>5</sup> Germanwatch (2021): Global Climate Risk Index. <http://bit.ly/3FjKtpi>

<sup>6</sup> ICRC (2020): Seven things you need to know about climate change and conflict. <http://bit.ly/3JzCA1z>

<sup>7</sup> Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (2021): Perspectives on a Global Green New Deal. <http://bit.ly/3Ffpq7q>

<sup>8</sup> Oxfam (2020): Confronting Carbon Inequality. <http://bit.ly/3mPyoS9>

<sup>9</sup> This individual carbon footprint is the equal share of carbon emissions for all activities for each person on the planet of the remaining global carbon budget we should not be exceeded by 2050 in order to stay within the 1.5 degree limit. See Akenji et al. (2021): 1.5-Degree Lifestyles. <https://bit.ly/3mLsKAO>

<sup>10</sup> Sources of infographic: Emissions savings plant-based diet, recycling: Wynes & Nicholas (2017): [bit.ly/IndivAct](http://bit.ly/IndivAct)  
Akenji et al. (2021): 1.5-Degree Lifestyles. <https://bit.ly/3mLsKAO>  
Flight emissions: Atmosfair: [atmosfair.de](https://atmosfair.de)  
Per capita CO2 emissions (figures from 2019): [bit.ly/owidCO2footp](http://bit.ly/owidCO2footp)

<sup>11</sup> Gössling/Humpe (2022): The global scale, distribution and growth of aviation. <https://bit.ly/401aRvZ>

<sup>12</sup> See especially land or forest-based projects like REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation): <https://redd-monitor.org/>

<sup>13</sup> Regarding CORSIA offsets see T&E (2021): <http://bit.ly/425b3wZ>. Regarding the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), a United Nations-run carbon offset scheme, see Ökoinstitut (2016): <https://bit.ly/3J6CAVg>

Guardian (2023): Revealed: more than 90% of rainforest carbon offsets by biggest certifier are worthless, analysis shows. <http://bit.ly/3yP6RTJ>

ZEIT and SourceMaterial (2023): The Carbon Con. The world's biggest companies, from Netflix to Ben & Jerry's, are pouring billions into an offsetting industry whose climate claims appear increasingly at odds with reality. <http://bit.ly/3JRbPWl>

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