R7 Tax the Rich to Save the Climate

Proposer: Les Jeunes Écologistes, Joves Ecosocialistes, Scottish Young Greens

Agenda item: 4. Resolutions

Motion text

While the rich are disproportionately responsible for the climate emergency and environmental degradation, it is mainly the poor who are suffering their consequences. The links between the climate, environmental and social crises must be recognized. They are not three separate crises, but manifestations of one single problem: capitalist exploitation.

Between 1990 and 2015, the richest decile of the world's population was responsible for more than half of greenhouse gas emissions. Greenhouse gas emissions from the "richest 1%" of our planet have increased since the Paris Agreement was signed and are likely to increase even more by 2030[1]. These striking disparities are the result of completely different lifestyles, as evidenced, for example, by disparities in airplane use. One percent of the world's population is responsible for half of the emissions caused by aviation, while 90% of world’s population have never flown[2].

These environmental inequalities take many forms and are present at all scales. On the one hand, the habits of the most affluent are more harmful to the environment and contribute more to climate change than those of the least affluent. On the other hand, exposure to environmental pollution and climate change is unequal. Poorer people live in neighborhoods with higher pollution of nitrogen dioxide[3], a gas produced during the burning of fossil fuels that worsens symptoms of asthma and reduces lung function growth[4]. Worryingly, the World Health Organization notes for Europe that: “although air pollution levels have decreased over recent years, inequalities in exposure persist”[5]. In the French Île-de-France region, for example, waste treatment facilities, such as incinerators, are often located in low-income neighborhoods[6]. Similarly, the poorest have fewer opportunities to adapt to climate change; they tend to have less access to green spaces that could help to cool off during heat waves, and it is more difficult to move away from high risk areas, such as regions threatened by rising sea levels and flooding. Nothing justifies that those who contribute most to climate change and the destruction of our environment can escape the consequences, for example by living in air-conditioned houses in areas where the impacts of climate change are less.

The Federation of Young European Greens works for a better recognition of environmental inequalities. These should be taken into account systematically by public authorities. Public authorities in Europe must fight any form of environmental inequality at all scales. Their efforts must go beyond encouraging individual consumer action. We need a paradigm shift.

Moreover, we must be extremely vigilant with regard to products that promise to have a lesser environmental and climatic impact. In response to the awareness of the climate and environmental emergency, more and more products have been put on the market that promise to be good for the planet and humanity. Organic food, fair trade products, electric vehicles, and carbon offsetting programmes often have a lower environmental and climate impact and are produced under better working conditions, but they are by far too expensive for the majority of the population. Thus, they are only accessible to the most affluent who can afford the luxury of ethical and environmental consumption choices. Worse, the promotion of these products conveys the idea that one must belong at least to the middle class to save the world. Even if it is imperative to reduce the impact of consumption on the planet and to improve the conditions of production, this cannot be achieved by adding a few more fair trade products to the shelves of our supermarkets. It must be a systemic change that includes helping the poor and raising social and environmental standards dramatically. The wealthy don’t save the world. They destroy it.

FYEG is fighting against all forms of inequality, for climate justice and environmental justice. Since these struggles are intimately linked, we cannot fight the climate emergency without fighting social inequalities and vice versa. We must fight against environmental inequalities, notably by making the wealthiest pay:

- Taxes on income and capital must be more progressive, including by an introduction of a wealth tax for the whole of Europe.

- We call on European states to introduce a “climate and environmental tax” for luxury products. The rental, purchase and maintenance of yachts, for example, should be heavily taxed according to their environmental impact. The EU should push for such a Union-wide tax to be implemented as soon as possible.

- European countries should close their airspaces to private jets. The Single European Sky initiative should support this prohibition.

- Environmental and climate policies must be subjected to rigorous scrutiny to identify their potentially regressive impacts. We must avoid at all costs that the poorest, already exploited by the capitalist economy, are disproportionately impacted by these policies.

- Revenues generated by the above-mentioned measures must be used to combat the effects of environmental inequalities and to support the poorest. Environmental and climate policies should not be a burden for poor people; they must be designed so as to benefit them.

- Environmental inequalities are also occurring in other parts of the world. While environmental standards in Europe are slowly rising, we must make sure that polluting activities are not simply moved to other parts of the world, which would increase environmental inequalities. The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism would be a first step in the right direction, but needs to be complemented by policies for other types of activity.

The Climate emergency, environmental degradation and economic inequalities are intimately linked. Let's fight against all three at the same time, let's tax the rich!

1. https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621305/bn-carbon-inequality-2030-051121-en.pdf

2. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378020307779 (Gössling, Humpe (2020): « The global scale, distribution and growth of aviation: Implications for climate change »)

3. https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/unequal-exposure-and-unequal-impacts (page 19)

4. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ambient-(outdoor)-air-quality-and-health

5. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/325176/9789289054157-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (page 57)

6. Ludosky & Toussaint (2020): “Ensemble nous demandons justice. Pour en finir avec les violences environnementales”