



Sustainable consumption (affluence)

It is completely unsustainable for the whole world population to enjoy the high-consumption lifestyles that industrialized countries such as the UK benefit from at present. Recent work on **biocapacity and ecological footprinting** carried out by the Global Footprinting Network indicates that it would require the resources of several “planet Earths” to allow this to happen.

Many environmental campaigners exhort us to adopt simpler lifestyles. They are, of course, correct, in that this is probably a necessary (though insufficient) precondition to saving the planet, and it is unethical for rich countries to insist on maintaining levels of affluence that are impossible for others to attain. Moreover, large disparities between the rich and the poor often conflict with human rights and result in conflict. According to a Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report in 2014 the richest one per cent of people owned 48 per cent of global wealth, and the richest 10 per cent owned more than 85 per cent.¹ It has been estimated that 90 per cent of total household wealth in the world is held by people in North America, Europe, and high-income Asian countries².

Even within individual nations, too wide a spread between rich and poor makes it very difficult to moderate consumption; a combination of celebrity culture and mass consumer marketing encourages people to aspire to lifestyles beyond the resources of the country and the environment. Though we do not advocate poverty as a way of life, very high levels of material consumption usually prove disappointing;

many of the goods and services we use do relatively little to enhance the quality of our lives, while having a disproportionate impact on the environment.

There are those who refuse to moderate their own lifestyles for the sake of posterity. These include both “enviro-sceptics”, who don’t acknowledge that an environment and resources crisis is looming, and “techno-fixers”, who believe in better technology, much of it yet to be discovered or realised, as a panacea for all environmental problems. However, we in Population Matters believe that individuals in economically-developed countries do need to moderate their consumption, and that in order to protect the environment these countries as a whole must be more frugal in their use of resources. But we also stress the importance of an integrated approach that recognises the overriding influence of population size on the whole issue of sustainability.

Contraction and Convergence

C&C is a global framework devised by the Global Commons Institute with the aim of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and thereby preventing catastrophic **climate change**. It is proposed as the basis of an equitable international strategy whereby rich countries restrain their future consumption rather than continuing to enjoy living standards in excess of what the planet can support for everyone.

The framework acknowledges that population numbers are an important component of sustainability, and hence includes provision for a

population base-year when calculating national emissions entitlements.

Reduced levels of personal consumption are needed, but on their own, they will enable sustainability only if we return to very basic and minimal subsistence levels. For a “decent quality of life”, each of the factors in the sustainability equation needs to be taken into account:

- the most environmentally-efficient technology needs to be made available for all countries;
- population numbers, globally and for individual countries, need to be stabilised and reduced to levels that can be supported at a level allowing decent standards of living for everyone.

Read about [personal contributions to sustainability](#) and the [sustainability equation](#).

References

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¹ <https://publications.credit-suisse.com/tasks/render/file/?fileID=60931FDE-A2D2-F568-B041B58C5EA591A4>

² http://www.wider.unu.edu/publications/working-papers/discussion-papers/2008/en_GB/dp2008-03/