



ELITES AND THE CLIMATE CHANGE: ACCELERATING THE CRISIS FROM THE TOP DOWN?

Maleeha Sattar

Climate change is driven by a complex interplay of natural and human factors and it is one of the biggest challenge we face today. However, the role of elites in accelerating this crisis is often overlooked. Elites who possess significant socio-economic power and influence, contribute disproportionately to greenhouse gas emissions and environmental degradation. They are exacerbating the climate crisis with their energy intensive consumption patterns, undemocratic political influence, and prioritization of economic interests over environmental sustainability.

Recently, the images from Ambani's extravagant pre-wedding events flooded our timelines. You might have heard ordinary folks joking they were invited but

didn't have time to go. Everything thing the richest Asian does gets attention and makes news. He is a conglomerate with a net worth of billions. The pre-wedding extravaganza was attended by the likes of Bill Gates, Zuckerberg, Trumps, and array of Bollywood and Hollywood stars. Articles appeared showing the number of private jets that arrived there, the carbon and ecological footprint of the wedding. The scant critical voices drowned in the cacophony of Reliance sponsored media outlets reminding us about the love family has for the nature.

Mukesh Ambani, was on the Advisory Committee to the COP28, of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The climate concerns expressed by this oil giant were heralded by the elites at Davos earlier. Another event, like COP, where the elites arrive in private jets. A single private jet emit as much as carbon dioxide in one hour as an average person in does in a year. Global elite, despite being a small fraction of the population, contribute disproportionately to the aviation sector's overall emissions. The luxurious lifestyles and consumption patterns show their blatant disregard for the environmental and societal impact. But many of them are fluent in climatespeak now. The elite's rhetoric on climate change echoes the insights of Olúf mí O. Táíwò recent book on Elite Capture. These well-positioned and resourced elites are hijacking political projects and distorting the climate change discourse by determining whose knowledge and value gets attention.

The climatespeak of the elites contradict their extravagant lifestyles, which include frequent air travel, ownership of multiple large properties, and consumption of high-emission goods and services. Their luxury consumption patterns, from yachts to high-end vehicles, have substantial carbon footprints both in their production and operation. The fashion industry which is heavily patronized by wealthy individuals is another significant contributor. High-end fashion not only involves energy intensive production processes but also promotes a culture of disposable clothing which further exacerbates environmental degradation. This relentless pursuit of opulence exemplifies the moral bankruptcy of the elite, prioritizing status symbols over planet's health.

The disproportionately large carbon footprints of the elites directly contribute to the climate crisis. In 2019, Oxfam's report about the polluter elites made headlines worldwide. It revealed that the top 1% wealthiest individuals were produced 16% carbon emissions. The poorest 66%, around 5 billion people, produced the same emission. The richest 10% contributed to half of the emissions that year. The report notes that someone in the bottom 99% would take around 1500 years to produce as much carbon as the richest billionaires do in a year. The 12 richest billionaires produced nearly 17 million tonnes of emission from their multiple large properties, transportation, yachts and investments. Those on the top of the list included Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, and Elon Musk.⁴⁴

The Great Carbon Divide is historically persistent and widening.⁴⁵ Dario Kenner in his book 'Carbon Inequality' has used the term polluter elites for the people running fossil fuel multinationals. He argues

that for long these elites have determined what is "politically possible" and have successfully prevented the transition to green economies.

Even if we ignore the personal consumption patterns we can't ignore the significant influence these elites have over the political and economic systems. They exert this influence by shaping policies and practices through lobbying, campaign contributions and controlling the media narratives. In "Why We can't afford the rich", Andrew Sayer, shows how the concentration of wealth have consequences for society and environment. He argues that the elites have developed systems which allow them to hide their wealth while increasing their political influence. These elites threaten the economy and climate because of the unsustainable and exploitative growth trajectories they favor.

They lobby to prevent the enactment of effective environmental regulations and to protect their vested interests in fossil fuels. They not only perpetuate subsidies for fossil fuel industries but also try to block renewable energy initiatives. In order to preserve their economic dominance, they follow a ruthless prioritization of profit over public welfare. In our own context, the dillydallying to introduce the solar panel manufacturing policy and rumors to end solar net metering to protect imported fuel based power generation is an example⁴⁶. The mainstream media, often owned or influenced by elite interests, enables them to shape public discourse around climate change. Media downplays the urgency of the climate crisis maintains status quo that benefits the elites.

The economic pursuits of the elite often coincide with industries that heavily pollute. Pakistan's elite investments in real estate are contributing to the deterioration of the nation's ecosystems, water resources, and communal lands, and heightening our vulnerability to climate disasters⁴⁷. This alignment creates systemic barriers to meaningful climate action, as transitioning to a low-carbon economy threatens these financial interests. Many elites also have substantial investments in fossil fuel companies. These investments have high returns which create financial incentives to resist or delay the shift to renewable energy.

⁴⁴<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/nov/20/twelve-billionaires-climate-emissions-jeff-bezos-bill-gates-elon-musk-carbon-divide?tag=MSF0951a18>

⁴⁵<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2023/nov/20/the-great-carbon-divide-climate-chasm-rich-poor>

⁴⁶<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2473144/for-fourth-time-govt-stalls-solar-panel-policy>

⁴⁷Read Ali Tauqeer Sheikh's insightful analysis on Dubai Leaks here: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1835169/climate-action-as-equity>

The economic self-interests derive continued support for fossil fuel exploration and extraction. This reflects gross ethical failing, where personal profit is prioritized over collective good of humanity and planet.

Progressive policies such as carbon taxes or strict emission regulations are portrayed as economically detrimental by elite interest. This resistance is rooted in short term economic impacts these policies could have on industries dominated by the wealthy. For instance, carbon taxes could reduce profits for heavy industries and increase operational costs. The elites use their economic and political power to oppose such measures, prioritizing immediate financial gains over long term environmental sustainability.

The elites disproportionately contribute to climate change and a shift in priorities and values among the wealthy and powerful is required. The global and local polluter elites are often vocalize about the climate crisis. Some even use their wealth to fund climate research and innovation, supporting renewable energy projects and investing in green technologies, including electrical vehicles. Among them are advocates for green growth and climate capitalism. The Tipping Points, funded by Bezos Earth Fund, is calling for governance changes aimed at distributional and environmental equities to avoid reinforcing the historical injustices. However, these wealthy entrepreneurs aren't driving any substantial change or transitioning to a low carbon economy. The posturing is mainly to deflect criticism and often amounts to greenwashing.

What can be done to change this? IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) stresses on the need for equitable and inclusive climate action which centralize the climate justice and social justice concerns because the vulnerable communities, who have least contribution in driving the climate change, are disproportionately affected by it. World Inequality Lab's Climate Inequality Report 2023, recommends progressive taxation and establishing ecological welfare states⁴⁸.

Scholars, activists and advocacy groups are arguing for multiple actions to tackle the inequalities which are at the heart of climate crisis. Thomas Picketty argues that social and economic issues must be centralized in tackling climate crisis. He called for introducing carbon tax and banning private jets.⁴⁹ Jason Hickel, Kate Raworth, Joan Martinez Alier and many others are calling for Degrowth⁵⁰. The Guardian and Oxfam report called for imposing a 60% tax on the income of the world's wealthiest 1%, which can reduce 700-million-ton reduction in global emission. There are movements calling for introducing Polluters Pay principle.

The role of rich and wealthy individuals and countries in accelerating the climate change is significant. Their consumption patterns, political influence, and economic interests all contribute to the persistence and worsening of the climate crisis. Addressing this issue requires a dual approach: holding elites accountable for their outsized impact while also harnessing their resources and influence for positive change. The path forward demands more than superficial commitments; it calls for a radical rethinking of how power and resources are distributed and used. Only by transforming the actions and priorities of the world's most powerful can we hope to achieve meaningful progress in the fight against climate change. Any genuine change will require them to relinquish relentless pursuit of power, profit and wealth for greater public good.

The author teaches at the Department of Government and Global Studies at ITU, Lahore.

⁴⁸Chancel, L., Bothe, P., Voituriez, T. (2023) Climate Inequality Report 2023, World Inequality Lab Study 2023/1

⁴⁹<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/nov/22/ban-private-jets-to-address-climate-crisis-says-thomas-picketty>

⁵⁰<https://degrowth.info/en>