

The Ongoing Correlation Between Inequality and Sustainability

Madeleine Guettler

Department of Economics and Department of Art and Music, Simmons University

LCIS 201: Integrative Seminar From Numbers to Narrative

Dr. Niloufer Sohrabji and Michael Zachary, MFA

March 26, 2022

In society today, inequality and sustainability are terms quite frequently thrown out there. However, what do these terms truly mean, and what is their impact? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines inequality as "the quality of being unequal or uneven" (*Inequality Definition & Meaning*, n.d.). Additionally, Oxford Languages defines sustainability as "avoidance of the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain an ecological balance." From a rudimentary standpoint, inequality and sustainability are ideas easily understood, where we see examples of the two terms everywhere in our lives. Whether talking about inequality in healthcare or income/socioeconomic status or in the case of sustainability, talking about depletion of natural resources and our impact on the environment/acceleration of climate change, these are topics frequently discussed. However, the relationship between inequality and sustainability is less known.

In recent years, "the most unequal affluent countries contribute more to climate change via pollution than their more equal counterparts" (Dorling, 2017). One may brush aside this information, especially as some areas aren't as devastated by climate change. However, the effect of climate change on natural disasters is undeniable. With the rise in temperatures and water levels, increasing chances of droughts, fires, hurricanes, and floods, just the U.S. alone "now spends almost 10 times as much responding to and recovering from natural events as it did in the 1980s" (Kaplan, 2020). In a study done in 2017, it was predicted: "the United States will see its levels of economic inequality increase due to the uneven geographical effects of climate change - resulting in 'the largest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich in the country's history'" (Dorling, 2017). While there isn't a perfect correlation in data collected, there is a consistent pattern that as inequality increases, sustainability issues increase. This is particularly true for consumption/waste, water consumption, Carbon Dioxide emission, transportation, and air travel. And what is also clear is that in many of these specific areas of interest, the top elite is the leading cause of the high rates. A possible light in our overall future is that "almost everything associated with the environment improves when economic equality is greater" (Dorling, 2017). Meaning that if nations take more proactive measures to create equality nationwide, we could slow down the environmental damage

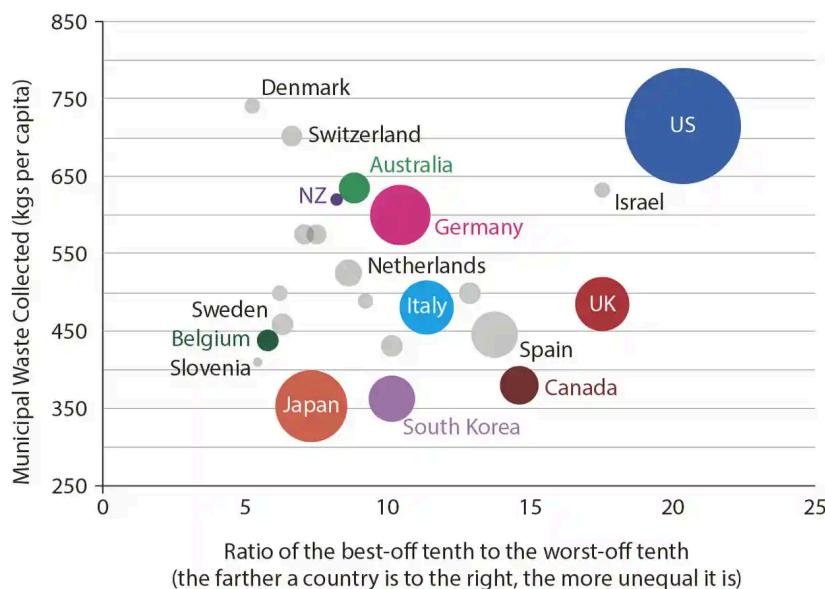
and possibly slow down the increasing number of natural disasters that only make more inequality across the globe.

Many factors can be looked at when exploring inequality and sustainability together.

Consumption/waste is one striking area to focus on. In this day and age, as societies become more advanced and there are constantly new products in every category possible coming out, there is constant pressure and even human desire to acquire these products. However, in unequal countries where income and assets define social class status, "the pressure to buy items to keep up with your peers, with "people who count", is enormous, especially when it comes to clothes, fashion, new cars, and other status symbols" (Dorling 2020). Society is encouraged to better themselves by constantly buying new products. Still, overall it creates a tremendous amount of waste when the product becomes out of style or no longer boosts you up the social class ladder, and we throw it out. In Figure 1, three variables are portrayed: country population illustrated through the size of each point, economic inequality where the further right on the chart, the more unequal, and finally, the municipal waste collected in kgs per capita.

Figure 1

Economic inequality and waste production, 2009-13



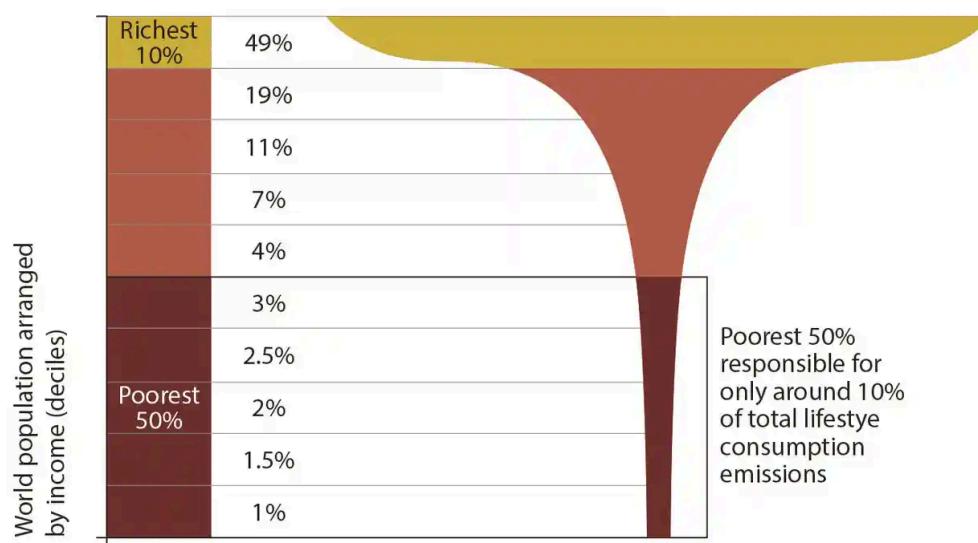
Source: (Dorling, 2017)

While there are outliers like Denmark and Switzerland, which is possibly due to them having the ability to collect more data, there is a striking correlation between inequality and waste collected. One may argue that the U.S.'s high level of waste is because they have the highest population, which is true. However, out of all the other countries portrayed, Japan is the second-largest population and has the lowest amount of waste while having a much lower inequality.

Another area where there is striking data around issues with sustainability as inequality increases is when looking at carbon dioxide emissions. The following figure looks at the proportion of average lifetime emissions worldwide based on income.

Figure 2

Average Lifetime Emissions Worldwide



Source: (Dorling, 2017)

This figure is striking because the poorest 50% of the worldwide population is only responsible for 10% of the total emissions. As the income inequality increases, emission increases. While the middle class takes up 41% of the emissions, what's even more striking is that the absolute elite, which is only 10% of the total world population, has the highest emission rate of 49%. The elite are responsible for almost half of the emission needs to be emphasized. So what is the reason for this enormous emission rate? The answer is inequality. In 2016 Oxfam collaborated with economists, and they discovered that "what drove

excessive consumption in any particular affluent country was economic inequality because the best-off in a country tend to waste more energy, heat their homes more than they need to, drive more than they need to in bigger gas-guzzling cars, take more flights and require more cement and other materials to construct their larger-than-needed buildings – while at the same time buying and throwing away more items" (Dorling, 2016). This reasoning makes sense as the higher the inequality, the higher the income gap between the poor and the elite, and the more money there is to spend for the elites on materialistic things. And this, in turn, gets connected to the high consumption waste as in modern society the culture is to throw away materials the moment there's a new more attractive product available.

In a diverse society, exploring inequality and sustainability through theory and pure data collection isn't always the most effective way of making the largest percentage of individuals understand the importance of the two. In a different context, during the women's liberation movement, when Carol Hanisch, after decades in 2006, chooses to write a new explanatory introduction to her February 1969 paper, *The Personal Is Political*, she notes the benefits of actual struggle when fighting for something versus simply sticking to theories. She states, "Political struggle or debate is the key to good political theory. A theory is just a bunch of words— sometimes interesting to think about, but just words, nevertheless—until it is tested in real life. Many a theory has delivered surprises, both positive and negative, when an attempt has been made to put it into practice" (Hanisch, 2006). Her comment on political theory not being effective till there's actual political struggle or debate can be related to economics and art concerning inequality and sustainability. Economics is very theory and data-based. While this data and different theories can effectively get some people to understand the importance of improving inequality and sustainability, words and numbers may not reach everyone. And this is where art comes in. Art can be used to provide a more visual representation of the correlation between the two. And this visual representation, at times, can be more potent than text. Climate change affects the number of natural disasters. Still, there's a difference between reading the data around the destruction or deaths versus seeing it portrayed as a form of art through photography. For example, let's look at the news written around the series of tornados in the U.S. in 2021. It was informative to write about the effect of

the tornado, such as explaining that it left "300 kilometers (185 miles) of devastation in their wake" (Hamann, 2021) or noting as Mayor Kathy Stewart did that her town Mayfield had "been reduced to matchsticks" (Hamann, 2021) but this only goes so far. What evokes more understanding of urgency from people is visualization such as these recording the damage.

Figure 3

Trail of Devastation



Source: (Hamann, 2021)

Figure 4

Matchsticks Town



Source: (Hamann, 2021)

In other domains of art, artists such as Alain Guerra and Neraldo de la Paz or Guerra de la Paz (GdlP) explore the excessive discarded textiles to portray not only the consequences of society's excessive consumption and disposal but also try to explore different "hopeful possibilities of reuse and renewal, breathing new life into reclaimed textiles" (*Guerra De La Paz – Art Works for Change*, n.d.) through their works "Atomic" and "Spring Sprang Sprung".

Figure 5

Atomic

Figure 6

Spring Sprang Sprung



Source: (Guerra De La Paz – Art Works for Change, n.d.)

These different representations of sustainability and over-consumption issues have a different effect than the plain economic perspective of sharing data. Inequality and sustainability are complicated topics with no easy solution, so it can sometimes be easier to ignore data and move on in the day. However, the visual representation of society's impact in these two domains through Art can stay in a person's mind longer and create a greater desire to take action. So one can argue that both Economics and Art are pretty necessary for these two domains.

Overall, both Economics and Art individually would not entirely do an adequate job getting the reality of inequality and sustainability across to individuals as both individually don't show the complete picture. With Economics, the numbers are there but not the effect, and with Art, the effect is there but not the exact data accompanying it. Additionally, inequality and sustainability must continue to be addressed. While there are more known striking effects of these two issues like natural disasters in the news, another notable example of the overall impact of climate change caused by these issues is Lake Suwa in Japan. For hundreds of years, Shinto Priests have recorded the freezing of this lake in the winter. For "the first 250 years of priests' recordings, the lake only failed to freeze over three times. Between 1955 and 2004, it failed to freeze over 12 times. Between 2005 and 2014, it failed to freeze over five times – every other year. Since 2014 it has not frozen over" (Dorling, 2017). This extreme example of climate change

represents the effect society has on the planet and should not be taken lightly, in addition to making the strive for equality only more urgent.

References

- Dorling, D. (2017, July 4). Is inequality bad for the environment? | Inequality. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/jul/04/is-inequality-bad-for-the-environment>
- Guerra de la Paz – Art Works for Change.* (n.d.). Art Works for Change. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from
<https://www.artworksforchange.org/portfolio/guerra-de-la-paz/>
- Hamann, G. (2021, December 13). *Kentucky is 'ground zero' in the aftermath of deadly US tornadoes*. DW. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from
<https://www.dw.com/en/kentucky-is-ground-zero-in-the-aftermath-of-deadly-us-tornadoes/g-60102748>
- Hanisch, C. (2006, January). *The Personal Is Political: the original feminist theory paper at the author's web site*. Carol Hanisch. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from
<http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>
- Inequality Definition & Meaning.* (n.d.). Merriam-Webster. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inequality>
- Kaplan, S. (2020, October 22). *Hurricanes, wildfires and other extreme weather are linked to global warming*. The Washington Post. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/2020/10/22/climate-curious-disasters-climate-change/>