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# IENE Comment

**Emissions as a privilege:  
a slippery slope towards division**



## Emissions as a privilege: a slippery slope towards division

*By Irina Slav\**

Greenhouse gas emissions are the biggest problem the world faces, we are being told repeatedly. Warnings regularly feature words such as “dramatic”, “catastrophic”, and “an existential threat”.

Yet it turns out that some emissions are necessary. These are the emissions that will help us avoid catastrophic climate change. And cutting those is inadvisable.

Earlier this month, Minna Palmroth, a professor in computational space physics, wrote [an opinion piece for the FT](#), in which she expressed her serious concern with some of her fellow scientists’ plans to scale back their research activities for fear of contributing to climate change.

Admitting that these activities do require massive amounts of energy, Professor Palmroth argues that “this is a price we must pay for understanding the world” and finding out more ways to reduce emissions. We emit to reduce emissions, in other words.

“How can we inform decision makers about the best ways to bring down carbon emissions if we can’t track the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, where it’s coming from and who’s producing it?” Professor Palmroth asks.

In that, she is absolutely right and in fairness, the transition push is not aiming at absolute zero. There have been calls for that, but they come from rather extreme climate voices.

Still, large energy consumers such as data centres, which power, among many other things, scientific research, are not something that is widely and frequently talked about and they should be talked about.

Data centres are a huge drain on energy resources and although many operators boast about being green, their claim is often only supported by power purchase agreements they close with wind and solar generators—even though they do not derive all their power from wind and solar.

Per the International Energy Agency, data centres already account for 1% of the world’s electricity consumption and this number will only grow as AI deployment gathers pace. As efforts to track and reduce methane emissions also ramp up, this, too, would add to energy consumption on a global scale.

According to Professor Palmroth and no doubt similar-minded scientists, however, these would be emissions “well spent”. This seems to imply that other emissions – the kind of emissions that come from activities such as driving to work or heating your home with a gas heater – are not well spent. And here, most of us would beg to differ.

In her opinion piece, Professor Palmroth calls on her fellow scientists to stop worrying about their own emissions so much and focus on the bigger emission picture that requires them to generate emissions in the first place.

But does this mean that the non-scientists who represent the overwhelming majority of the global population should continue worrying about their emissions just because they are not scientists contributing to the transition? This question certainly presents an interesting conundrum.

What makes the conundrum this interesting is the delineation of two groups: one that must reduce its emissions and another that has an elevated status because of its involvement in emission reduction efforts and could emit without remorse.

This is a slippery slope – the us-versus-them division has never served a positive purpose. In fact, it has invariably ended in disaster, as even the most cursory glance at history would remind us.

Yet the argument that some people’s emissions are bad but other people’s emissions are good, because they are necessary, does just this: divide people into us versus them. It is a very unequal division that, it bears repeating, elevates a small group of people to a higher status that allows them to be emitters. Because their emissions are the price to pay to reduce all other emissions, the argument goes.

The logic that this argument uses is the same logic that has allowed people such as Bill Gates and John Kerry to claim that it is no problem that they travel the world in private jets—because they work and invest in the transition to net zero. This, while regular taxpayers—and voters—are being told to turn their thermostats down and take shorter showers to save energy and reduce emissions.

To say that the above can ever be accepted as palatable by those same taxpayers and voters would be quite unrealistic. In fact, the farmer protests currently taking place in Northwestern Europe are proof that we, the people, do not take kindly to the “Rules for thee but not for me” approach to governance. This is not the Middle Ages when the actions of the feudal lords were not to be questioned by their subjects. Or at least, it shouldn’t be.

Worrying about your carbon footprint is quite a normal reaction to a constant flood of warnings that we should all worry about our carbon footprint. The flood does not discriminate between scientists and non-scientists. The message is “Worry”, so people worry.

Yet perhaps there is a more productive and less stress-inducing path towards reducing emission-related anxiety than telling a certain group they are allowed to emit because they are superior to the rest of us. That path would be to dial down the alarm calls and focus on working solutions to actual problems such as energy poverty.

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