

REBALANCING THE SCALES:

*Confronting carbon inequality
in Ireland*



OXFAM
Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

The evidence is clear that we are in the midst of climate breakdown. Based on current trajectories, leading scientists project that 1.5°C of global heating above pre-industrial levels will be exceeded within a few years. This would place us firmly in the ‘danger zone’ that the Paris Agreement was supposed to avoid. Once that threshold has been breached, there is a very real risk of triggering cascading and irreversible damage to our planetary systems of life support.^[i]

Ahead of COP30 in Brazil this November, Oxfam International has released a major new report, *Climate Plunder: How a powerful few are locking the world into disaster*.^[ii] The report is based on new research which finds that the high-carbon lifestyles of the super-rich are blowing through

the world’s remaining carbon budget – the amount of CO₂ that can be emitted while avoiding climate disaster – at a staggering rate. It also details how billionaires are using their political and economic influence at the highest levels to maximise their private profits by keeping humanity hooked on fossil fuels.

COP30 represents what is likely to be the last chance to design, agree, adequately finance and implement a global roadmap for tackling the climate crisis. Ireland has a crucial role to play in this process. It must raise its ambition and efforts to cut national emissions. It must scale up its climate finance contributions to developing economies in the Global South. And it must use international diplomacy to encourage other developed countries to do the same. Ireland can be a climate leader, should it choose to be.

However, there remains a lot of work to be done for Ireland to get its own house in order, too. Government is on track to miss national net zero targets by a significant margin.^[iii] Braver and more robust action is therefore urgently needed to reduce emissions.



This short paper is a companion piece to Oxfam International's new Climate Plunder report. It finds that Ireland mirrors global trends, whereby the lifestyles of those with the highest incomes are responsible for the highest proportion of consumption-based carbon emissions. Rebalancing emissions is therefore critical to buying more time for a sustainable transition.

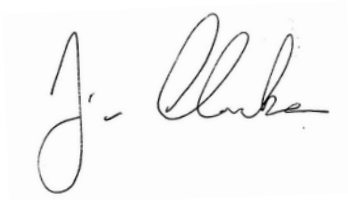
To achieve this rebalancing, substantial reductions can and must come from targeting the disproportionately high levels of carbon emissions associated with the consumption habits of the richest in our society. This must be done in a differentiated way that protects the most vulnerable people from both the negative impacts of climate breakdown and the costs associated with climate action, whilst simultaneously tackling the unsustainability of overproduction and initiating a just transition.

We cannot continue with an economy that rewards overconsumption by the few while exposing the many to climate chaos. We are already witnessing the preventable deaths, conflicts, forced displacements and endangering of entire regions due to climate breakdown.

This coming COP30 in Brazil is likely to be the last chance to design, agree and adequately finance a global roadmap for tackling the climate crisis. Ireland can and must lead by example at COP30 by ensuring those most responsible for emissions pay their fair share towards a just and sustainable transition.

Climate justice means holding those most responsible accountable – not only because it is fair, but because it is the fastest way to cut emissions and secure a liveable planet for all.

Jim Clarken, Oxfam Ireland CEO

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Clarken', is positioned on a light blue rectangular background.

CARBON INEQUALITY

COP30 marks 10 years since the Paris Agreement was signed in 2015. During this period, the world's richest 1% have burned through more than twice as much of the carbon budget than the poorest half of humanity combined.^[iv]

However, the global super-rich are not just overconsuming carbon, but also actively investing in and profiting from the most polluting corporations. Oxfam's research finds that the average billionaire around the world produces 1.9 million tonnes of CO₂ a year through their investments. Almost 60% of these billionaire investments are classified as being in high climate impact sectors such as oil and mining, meaning their investments emit two-and-a-half times more than an average investment in the S&P Global 1,200.^[v]

The emissions of the investment portfolios^[vi] of just 308 billionaires total more than the combined emissions of 118 countries.^[vii] The power and wealth of super-rich individuals and corporations have also enabled them to wield unjust influence over policymaking and to water down the ambition and outcomes of key climate negotiations in their favour. At COP29, 1,773 lobbyists linked to the fossil fuel industry were granted badges to access the negotiations – more than the 10 most climate-vulnerable nations combined.

No country is immune to the undue influence of the fossil fuel lobby. This includes Ireland. Recent research by Action Aid Ireland and Trócaire has shown that as of June 2024, Irish-based subsidiaries of investment companies held €31.76 billion (\$34 billion) in fossil fuel investments.^[viii] This puts Ireland 14th globally in terms of fossil fuel investment by manager location, alongside economies that have substantial fossil fuel industries. Along with Switzerland, Ireland is one of the only two jurisdictions with such significant fossil fuel investments without having a major fossil fuel industry of its own, putting it ahead of fossil fuel producers like Brazil, Russia and Kuwait.^[ix]

CONFRONTING CARBON INEQUALITY IN IRELAND



As is the case elsewhere around the world, Ireland's richest individuals' consumption habits drastically exceed what is required to satisfy their needs. Much more must therefore be done to tackle excessive carbon intensive consumption and advance efforts to transition away from an economic model that creates obscene levels of economic and carbon inequality in the first place.

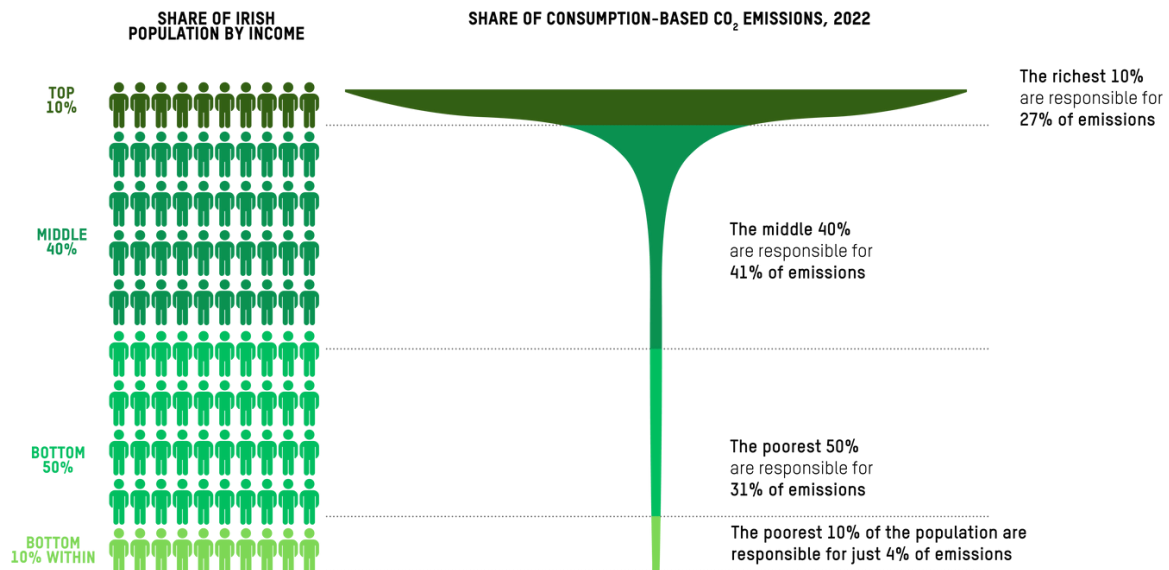
The following findings summarise the state of carbon inequality in Ireland based on data analysis of consumption-based emissions generated by different income groups between 1990 and 2022.^[x]

The data clearly shows that higher income groups have consistently contributed significantly higher levels of emissions than lower income groups. This highlights the need to take a justice-oriented approach to tackling consumption-based carbon emissions, which recognises and responds to the differentiated nature of consumption across income groups.

Taking a climate justice approach to this problem means targeting the disproportionate and unnecessary emissions associated with luxury consumption by rich and super-rich individuals first. This is not only a moral position but also a pragmatic one, as it is the wealthiest in society who are most able to safely reduce their levels of consumption without impeding their ability to secure life's necessities. They can also more reasonably absorb the costs associated with climate action and a just transition.



FINDINGS



- Based on 2022 data, individuals with income levels in the top 10% in Ireland emit over a quarter of consumption-based carbon emissions (27%). Individuals in the middle 40% income bracket emit 41%, while people with income levels in the bottom 50% emit only 31% of total consumption-based emissions (see Figure 1).
- This means that Ireland's richest 10% emit almost as much as the bottom 50%, despite the bottom 50% of earners accounting for roughly five times as many people (see Table 1).
- The richest 10% in Ireland have been consistently responsible for roughly a quarter of Ireland's total consumption-based carbon emissions since 1990 (see Figure 2).
- On a per capita basis, someone in the richest 1% emits 14 times as much consumption-based carbon emissions as someone in the bottom 50%. (see Figure 3).
- The emission per capita of individuals in the top 1% income bracket is 80 t CO₂, with the top 0.1% of the population's per capita consumption rate a whopping 286 t CO₂. To put this in perspective, we need to reach an average per capita carbon footprint of just 2.5 t CO₂ by 2030 to achieve our Paris Agreement commitments. This implies that what is currently considered by many to be the pinnacle of success in terms of lifestyle and consumption is in fact deeply anti-social and environmentally destructive.

IRELAND'S RICHEST 10% EMIT ALMOST AS MUCH EMISSIONS AS THE BOTTOM

50%

SOMEONE IN THE RICHEST 1% IN IRELAND EMITS

14x

AS MUCH EMISSIONS AS SOMEONE IN THE BOTTOM 50%

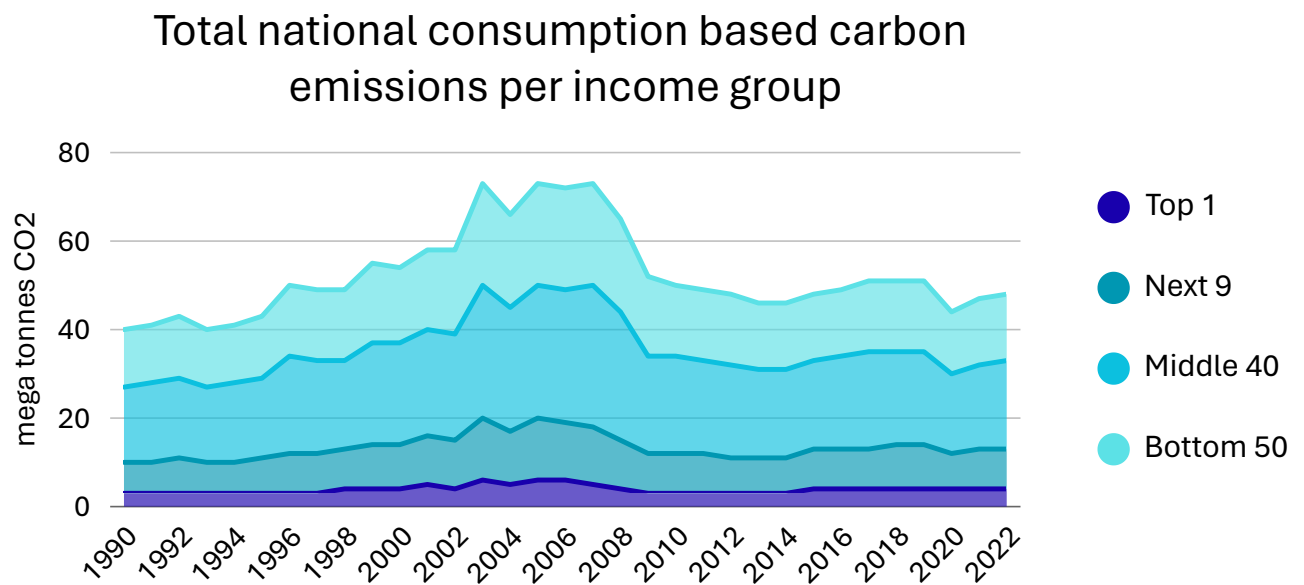


Figure 1: Total national consumption-based carbon emissions per income group, 1990-2022.

Table 1: Breakdown of Consumption Emissions per income group.

	Population	Emissions per income group, Mt CO2	Emissions share, %	Annual emissions per person, ton CO2/capita
Richest 0.1%	4,649	1.4	3	286
Richest 1%	51,657	4.2	8	80
Richest 10%	516,570	13	27	25
Middle 40%	2,066,280	20	41	9.5
Poorest 50%	2,582,850	15	31	5.8

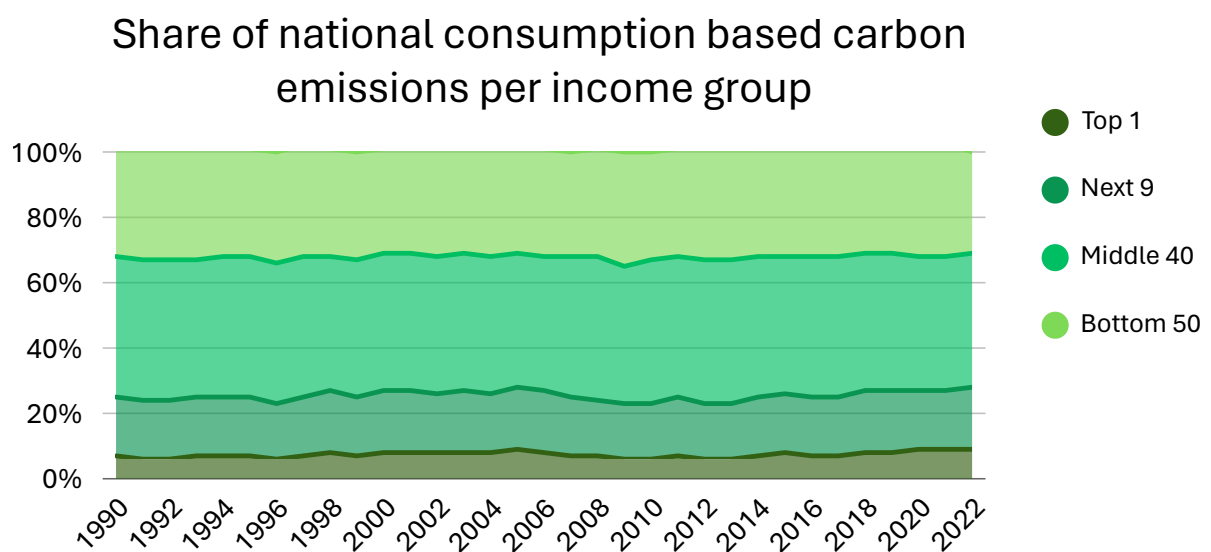


Figure 2: Share of national consumption-based carbon emissions per income group, 1990-2022.

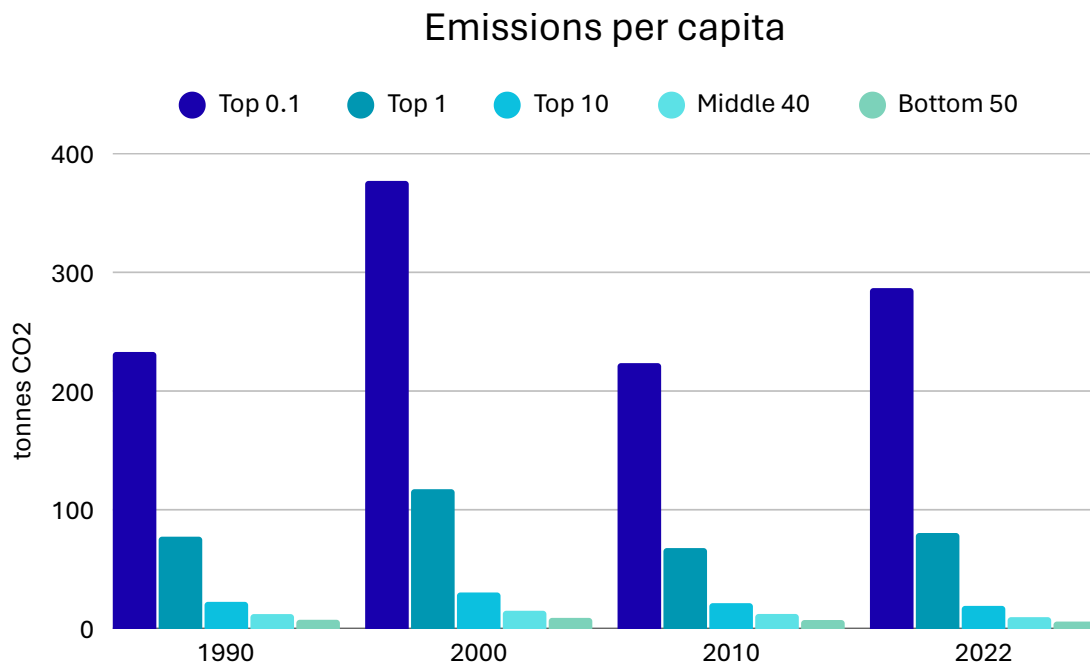


Figure 3: Emissions per capita in 1990, 2000, 2010 and 2022.

While available data does not identify the forms of consumption that make up the footprints of the highest income groups in Ireland, inferences can be drawn from the consumption habits of high-income people documented in other studies. Analysis of carbon emissions associated with households in the top 10% and 1% of emitters in the EU shows that by far the largest share of emissions is from transport – car journeys, and especially for the very highest emitters, flights.^[xii] This pattern seems to be common across regions: another study estimated that the top 10% richest households globally use around 45% of all the energy linked to land transport and around 75% of all energy linked to aviation, compared to just 10% and 5% respectively for the poorest 50%.^[xiii]

By contrast, more basic goods such as home heating, electricity and food are found to constitute the majority of emissions footprints of lower income groups. This data tells a very clear story – income matters a lot in relation to climate impact and action.

Most people in Ireland could not afford to consume in the same ways and at the same rate of its richest individuals. But none of us can afford to allow those patterns of excess and luxury consumption to continue if we are to have any hope of reducing overall emissions at the rate required to meet Ireland's net zero targets and stay within its fair share of the global carbon budget.

Yet it is questionable whether higher taxation by itself will be enough of a deterrent for the

super-rich to end hyper consumption, which has unfortunately become so closely linked to status. As a society, we therefore need to have a conversation about what forms of consumption are necessary and acceptable as we come to terms with the need to drastically reduce our climate impact.

It is important to recognise this as a structural problem that requires a collective response. The gross disparities in both levels of income and levels of consumption-based emissions in Ireland and across the world are symptoms of the much wider issue of how the economy is organised and run. Climate action cannot be based on personal virtue alone within an economy that impedes so many people's capacity to choose how they live, work and consume in the first place.

The lowest earners in our society are not just limited in the amounts of carbon-based consumption they can afford. This also directly translates to the financial capacity of individuals to consume in 'greener' ways that reduce their carbon footprint, whether it is to buy electric vehicles, solar panels, make alternative dietary choices and so on. It has been revealed that the fossil fuel industry actively promoted the very concept of the 'carbon footprint' as a way to shift the blame for causing the climate crisis onto individual consumers and away from the corporations that continue to profit from it.^[xiv]

What is therefore required is a deep and properly informed conversation about how Ireland's economy is run and for whom, as well as how it relates to and acts within the wider world. Core to this is the need to fundamentally rethink the supremacy given to profit-making, wealth accumulation and the maximisation of GDP growth over and above all other social and ecological concerns. There is no evidence that a growth-based economic model is capable of operating within planetary boundaries to provide a safe, secure and sustainable future for all.

CLIMATE JUSTICE AND THE NEED FOR SYSTEM CHANGE

It is the great injustice of the climate crisis that those least responsible for causing the problem are also the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate breakdown. Research by Oxfam and others has consistently shown that people from the Global South, Indigenous people, women, racialised communities and the working class are disproportionately affected.^[xv, xvi]

However, their vulnerability is also a direct result of the systematic ways they have been and continue to be exploited within an extractive economy that funnels our collective wealth into the pockets of the super-rich whilst pumping billions of tonnes of emissions into the atmosphere every year. This means that those whose safety, security and wellbeing most immediately depends on taking urgent action to tackle and adapt to the climate crisis at all levels are least able to afford the costs of doing so.

These realities inform a core principle of climate justice; that the onus for rapidly reducing greenhouse gas emissions and financing a just transition lies with the countries, companies and individuals who have emitted the most – and who have profited the most from the levels of economic development made possible by burning huge amounts of fossil fuels.

Climate justice is more than the issue of historical responsibility, however. It is also about taking a broad, far-reaching and transformative approach to climate action that prioritises social justice, equality and collective wellbeing. This requires levels of ambition that go beyond incremental technical fixes and technological innovations to promote and support ‘green’ GDP growth.

Again, there is not currently any evidence to suggest that it is possible to ‘green’ the existing growth-based economic system within the time remaining to reduce emissions to levels conducive with securing a safe planetary future.^[xvii] So why take the risk? We should instead seek to challenge the economic assumptions that perpetuate business-as-usual thinking when it comes to taking just climate action.

Yet such genuine efforts to centre a transformative approach to climate justice are still overwhelmingly absent from policymaking. Global carbon emissions from fossil fuels have steadily increased in the decade since the Paris Agreement was signed – reaching a record high in 2024^[xvii] – as Global North countries drastically overshoot their fair share of the global carbon budget.^[xix] Meanwhile, the climate finance target agreed at COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, last year to mobilise \$300 billion annually by 2035 fell far short of what developing countries actually need to cut emissions and address the impacts of climate breakdown for their populations, which was estimated to be around \$1.3 trillion.^[xx, xxi]

In Ireland, the government’s approach to climate action is still characterised by a narrow focus on incrementally reducing greenhouse gas emissions.^[xxii] Environmental Protection Agency projections show that if all current policies and plans are implemented across all sectors, the Republic will still fall significantly short of its own national targets for reducing emissions by 2030.^[xxiii]

These levels of climate inaction, delay and obstruction are indefensible. We must not accept to live in a world in which the most vulnerable people in society are left to suffer the consequences of a crisis they did not cause, both globally and across Ireland. We must also decisively reject the enduring toxic influence the fossil fuel, agrifood and other greenhouse gas intensive industries (including financial institutions investing in these industries) has had over our economy by severely limiting their influence on public debates and political decision-making.

It is also simply not feasible that people already experiencing high levels of precarity should be expected to do so much to change behaviours and consumption habits to lessen their own climate impact. While the poorest and most marginalised people struggle to secure the necessities to live a safe, decent and dignified life, the actions of the world’s richest and most powerful countries, companies and individuals are bringing us perilously close to climate catastrophe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ireland's current emissions trajectory is incompatible with the scale of action required to avert climate catastrophe. It is therefore incumbent upon Government to implement measures to rapidly reduce overall emissions and scale up its efforts to advance a just transition. This paper has shown that addressing the unsustainability of carbon-based consumption has an important role to play in doing so.

However, Oxfam Ireland is clear that the consumption habits and associated emissions of individuals are a symptom of the much deeper problem of Ireland's attachment to an economic model that values and promotes profit maximisation, concentrated private wealth accumulation and the indefinite pursuit of GDP growth above all else. It is on this basis that we recommend that the Irish government should:

- **Commit to using Ireland's remaining carbon budget in ways that are compatible with the principles of climate justice**, by seeking to reduce inequality in all its forms, put mechanisms in place to protect our most vulnerable communities against the impacts of climate breakdown and maximise the social benefits of a post-carbon transition.
- **Target emissions associated with excessive levels of consumption** by introducing policy measures, such as progressive taxes on luxury goods and services, such as frequent flying, private jets and sports utility vehicles (SUVs). Ringfence the revenues generated by these taxes for financing a just transition that ensures equal access to essential



services, including low-carbon public transport, adequate housing, clean energy, healthcare and childcare. Ireland should advocate for such measures to be implemented and coordinated at a multilateral basis at the EU and UN level to ensure that Ireland is not disadvantaged by being a leader in this regard.

- **Make the richest polluters pay through taxation on extreme wealth, excess profits taxes on fossil fuel corporations**, and supporting the UN Convention on International Tax Cooperation.
 - **Increase efforts to fulfil Ireland's global climate obligations, including by scaling up its international climate finance contributions** through grants-based mechanisms of support for grassroots communities and civil society organisations in the Global South. Use Ireland's voice and standing on the global stage to persuade other developed countries to do the same.
 - **Guarantee decent, secure and well-paying green jobs for people currently in precarious employment**, and especially for workers currently employed in sectors of the economy that will be most impacted by the post-carbon transition.
 - **Curb the economic and political influence of the richest polluters by banning fossil fuel corporations from climate negotiations such as COP**, implementing robust sustainability regulations for corporations and financial institutions (such as the EU'S Corporate Sustainable Due Diligence Directive), and rejecting trade and investment agreements like Investor-State Dispute Settlements (ISDS) that put the interests of the super-wealthy above public good.
 - **Strengthen the participation of civil society and Indigenous groups in climate negotiations** to address the unequal impacts of climate change.
 - **Commit to moving beyond a focus on GDP growth to an economy that prioritises equality, wellbeing and planetary health**. Commit to exploring and testing new economic models with meaningful, substantive and formalised input from civil society. Ban lobbyists and advertising linked to the fossil fuel industry and other socially and ecologically harmful industries from these discussions and future policymaking processes.
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ENDNOTES

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OXFAM IRELAND

Oxfam Ireland is part of Oxfam International, a global confederation of 21 independent and interconnected affiliates working across 66 countries to end inequality the cause of poverty and injustice. Oxfam Ireland mobilises the power of people to build a global movement that transforms lives and creates lasting change.

Oxfam Ireland is an all-island organisation embedded in communities across both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. We operate 46 charity retail shops, providing responsible, affordable shopping options to people while supporting climate action and poverty alleviation. These shops are powered by a volunteer network of over 900 people, and are supported by the generosity of approximately 280,000 individuals who donate pre-loved goods every year goods for use in our shops. In addition, during 2024 25,314 individuals donated to support our work and 37,285 people took campaign actions. These donations and campaign actions combined with the revenue generated in our shops, support Oxfam Ireland's life-changing long-term development projects; life-saving humanitarian assistance and campaigning and advocacy to tackle the root causes of poverty and injustice. We are both humbled and inspired at the level of civic participation that Oxfam Ireland fosters throughout the island. This high level of participation provides a clear demonstration of the broad public support for our actions and approaches.

We believe that everyone has the right to thrive in a just and sustainable world. To this end, we work collaboratively to challenge discrimination, exclusion and exploitation; we empower communities to build better lives for themselves, and we continue to provide direct, life-saving assistance to people facing crisis and disaster.

In all of this, we work to fight inequality, recognising that ending poverty is only possible by tackling systemic inequality and injustice. Poverty arises from the violation of people's basic human rights. When someone is denied the right to own land, the right to education, access to basic services like clean water, a fair price for the crops they grow, or a fair wage for the work they do, the result is poverty.

Last year, Oxfam Ireland, with support from Irish Aid, worked in over 11 countries and reached 2.3 million people through our development and humanitarian programmes.



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