



Putting multidimensional inequalities in human wellbeing at the centre of transitions

Jason Hickel and colleagues¹ reported large inequalities in global resource extraction, which has led to an ecological crisis. Hickel and colleagues show that high-income countries are responsible for 74% of global excess material use of equitable and sustainable boundaries from 1970 to 2017. Therefore, the authors suggested that high-income countries should undergo post-growth and degrowth transformations.

Adding to Hickel and colleagues' convincing assessment, we want to introduce a broader focus on distributive justice in human and planetary wellbeing, which goes

beyond resource extraction. We provide a broad view of the multiple dimensions of inequality, capturing enablers (eg, material use) and the effects of resource use that act as barriers to human wellbeing (eg, air pollution). We follow the theory of human needs with the universal goal of avoiding serious harm across the globe and across generations,² and enabling capabilities and opportunities needed for a decent life.^{3,4} We argue that such a comprehensive focus on human and planetary wellbeing allows responsibilities to be shared more fairly in any transition process.

The figure shows Lorenz curves that represent current multidimensional inequalities. There is an unequal global distribution for several indicators used in the literature reflecting the dominating development paradigm.³ High-income countries (ie, 10–20% of the global population) account for 50% of enabling conditions.

These countries benefit from the use of global commons, resources, and amenities (figure; B), but are less vulnerable to impeding effects (figure; A). Hickel and colleagues' cumulative overshoot of material use is the most unequal (figure, B)

For low-income countries, this trend is reversed. In fact, 50% of the global population account for only around 20% of enabling conditions (figure; B). However, low-income countries are affected disproportionately by effects that impede wellbeing (figure; A). These effects are often inflicted by high-income countries because low-income countries have contributed little to the deteriorating conditions of the planet. These low-income countries do not have access to the services and materials needed for decent living.

These findings substantiate the argument made by Hickel and colleagues. If the cumulative approach of adding up the unequal distribution

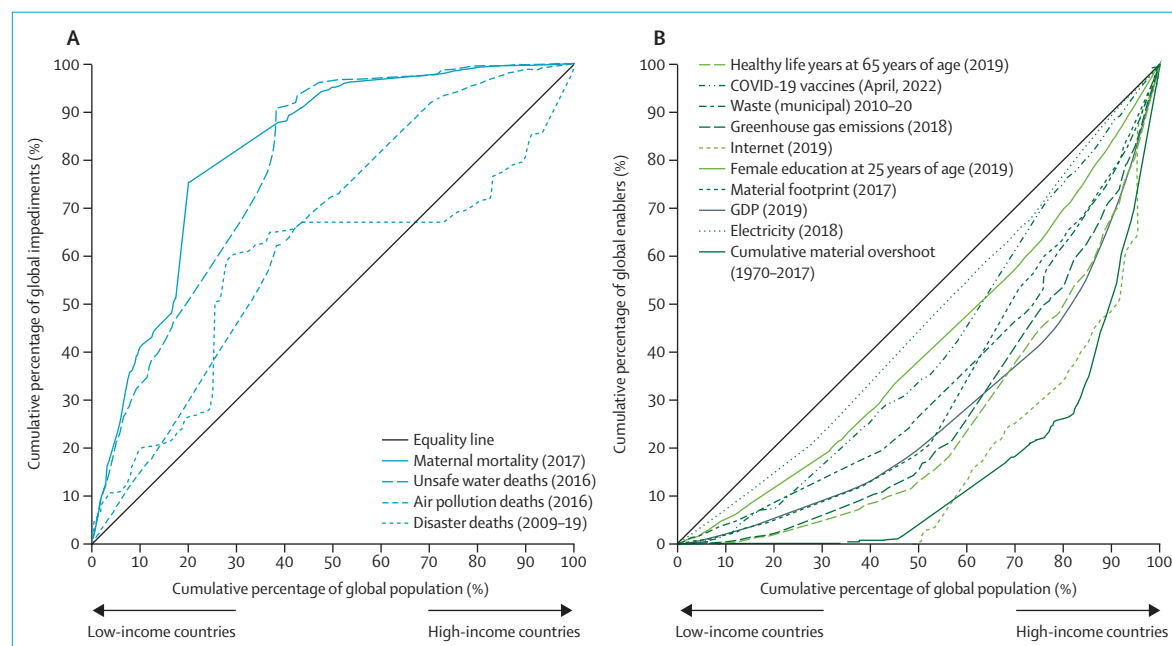


Figure: Multidimensional inequalities in human wellbeing

(A) Impediments are above the line of equality (45° line) because low-income countries are disproportionately affected. (B) Enablers are below the line of equality because high-income countries benefit most from resource use. The further a curve is away from the line of equality, the higher the inequality. To facilitate our comparison, we ordered all countries in the Lorenz curves by ascending GDP per capita. Therefore, the curves are not smooth (except for the GDP curve) as usual Lorenz curves are, which are ranked according to the level of the indicator featured on the vertical (y) axis. The horizontal (x) axis shows the cumulative share of population, with low-income countries closer to the origin and higher-income countries positioned further to the right. Thus, we can overlay them and show several indicators together. The vertical (y) axis shows the respective cumulative share of enablers (eg, materials) and impediments (eg, fatalities from air pollution). The appendix contains details on indicators and data (pp 1–2). GDP=gross domestic product.

See Online for appendix

over time for other indicators is used, the inequalities are much larger. The problem lies in the unequal way resource use is characterised globally. Therefore, we support the suggestion made by Hickel and colleagues that high-income countries should reduce their resource use to fair and sustainable levels. These high-income countries also need to provide finances and support to other nations to address the effects of planetary infringement, minimal access to services and materials, and poor managing capacities. We suggest putting human wellbeing and planetary health at centre stage, by measuring and setting targets for reducing multiple inequalities, to avoid short-term and sectoral policies. In addition to addressing these distributional justice issues, policymakers need to consider aspects of procedural and corrective justice to design truly prescient policy interventions that will be widely accepted.

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