



Surely the changes need to be made by countries like the USA and China. The UK is not a big contributor to the problem?

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## **Surely the changes need to be made by the countries like USA and China. The UK is not a big contributor to the problem?**

With climate denialism fading out, there has been a shift towards tactics of delaying climate action. These tactics aim not to deny the existence of climate change, but to discourage immediate action or to prevent action on the scale needed to tackle the crisis. This can have disastrous consequences, resulting in temperature increases far above the 1.5°C – 2°C agreed upon in the Paris Agreement. So even though emissions are falling in the UK, they may not be falling fast enough - as the climate activist Bill McKibben says, '[winning slowly is the same as losing](#)'. One of the main tactics of climate delay, is '[whataboutism](#)', in which countries or organisations use the high emissions elsewhere to justify inaction. This can most often be seen when people highlight the large emissions in countries such as China or the US.

It is true that China and the United States are overwhelmingly the largest contributors to climate breakdown – together they accounted for [42% of global emissions in 2019](#). But their large emissions now do not absolve us of our need to reduce emissions to zero in the UK. There are many reasons for this, most notable is that the climate crisis is a global issue – emissions need to reach zero everywhere, not just in the areas they are highest. This therefore means that global cooperation is essential, - nations/ organisations/ companies acting together at multiple scales will make decarbonisation significantly easier than acting alone. Beyond the need for global cooperation, the UK still has significant moral obligations to decarbonise. This becomes increasingly clear when you examine the UK's full emissions on a per capita basis (i.e., an individual's share of total emissions).

If we were to examine the consumption-based (includes not only the emissions produced within a territorial boundary, but also the emissions embedded in imports and exports) per-capita emissions of different countries, then each person in the [UK consumes 8 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per year](#) compared to only 6.3 tons a year for China. These numbers become even more alarming when we compare with developing nations such as Tanzania, which has per capita consumption-based emissions of only 0.37 tons.

Another way to look at emissions of a nation is to examine cumulative emissions – since CO<sub>2</sub> can stay in the atmosphere for more than 100 years (most CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere remains for between 300-1000 years) we must look at the total emissions released during that time by a country. When we do this, it is clear that the UK has even more responsibility to act. As of the start of 2019, the UK had the [fifth highest](#) cumulative emissions (77 billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub>), with only the US, China, the former Soviet Union, and Germany ranking higher. If you were to go one step further and take per capita cumulative emissions, then the [UK has the second highest emissions](#), only slightly behind the US.

But at the end of the day, the atmosphere is global, whether the emissions come from the US, China, or the UK, they all need to get to zero. The UK can and should help lead the mission to decarbonise the world – we were the first to industrialise and have thus

benefitted the most from fossil fuels. Developed nations also have a responsibility to assist developing and emerging economies in their efforts to decarbonise. After all, we were able to pollute as much as we liked whilst developing and so it is our responsibility to assist other nations to develop in a way that does not damage the environment or climate.