NOT EVERYONE IS IN THE SAME BOAT

Climate and Inequality in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract

The Middle East and North Africa is one of the regions that will be affected the most by climate change, extreme weather events, exacerbating the chronic water scarcity that it suffers from and current dependency on fossil fuels. Climate change impacts are already witnessed in many countries, especially those experiencing conflicts. At the same time the decades-long austerity policies in the region are not only fuelling inequalities but also make it virtually impossible for the countries in the region to spend on climate. The climate threats driven by the richest people, corporations, and rentier economies are existential to the region. Meanwhile, people living in poverty, marginalized communities vulnerable to climate change and those living in conflict-settings are the ones impacted the hardest. Women and girls, refugees and other groups experiencing discrimination, are particularly at disadvantage to current austerity policies and the consequences of climate change. The consequences are felt in all parts of the region and by most people, yet only the richest people have the wealth and the power and influence to adapt from the consequences of climate breakdown. Austerity policies are exacerbating the climate crisis, and the only way to address the climate breakdown is through taxing the wealthy and their polluting consumptions and massively invest in public services and climate mitigation, adaptation and transition.

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Cover photo: Jordan is one of the most water-scarce countries in the world, making it vulnerable to climate change. These days the Wala dam, that provides water to the region and Amman (Jordan's capital) is at 4% of its total water capacity. The dry landscape around it is testimony of the lack of water. On the land surface of the dam, cracks have appeared where there used to be water. The people in the area hope some rain will come soon, they know that even if it rains for days, it won't be enough, but at this point any rain is welcome.
Photo credit: Madaba Governorate, Jordan. (c) Paula Gonzalez / Oxfam

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Summary

Inequality kills. It suffocates communities. This is because inequality precipitates climate breakdown as the wealthiest countries and individuals drive up emissions, without restraint, through their polluting consumption and investments. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region stands at the crux of two interlinked and inseparable crises: skyrocketing inequality and climate breakdown. The region faces extreme climate vulnerabilities, including record-breaking heat waves, droughts, desertification, and worsening food insecurity. Governments in the region have long attempted to address these vulnerabilities through technological solutions instead of attacking the root causes of the climate crisis. They have been wedded to economic systems and policies rooted in neoliberalism and austerity that only serve the few. This has enabled the region's super-rich to pollute and concentrate income, wealth and power.

MENA is already one of the hottest, most water-scarce regions on Earth, with temperatures rising 1.5°C over the past 30 years. Projections estimate 3.4 million heat-related deaths by 2041, and 83% of the current population grapples with water scarcity and extreme disparities in access.

The richest in MENA produce a shockingly disproportionate share of consumption-based emissions with their massive superyachts and private jets. As of 2022, the richest 10% are responsible for 60% of emissions, while the poorest 50% of the region contributes only 10%. The wealthiest in MENA disproportionately contribute to climate change while insulating themselves from its consequences.

These emissions disparities are driven by the staggering economic inequalities in the region. During the pandemic, MENA's billionaires accumulated more wealth than during the preceding decade. MENA billionaires increased their wealth by 65 percent from US$54.2bn to US$89.5bn in 2024[1]. Even before the pandemic, MENA had seen the inequality gap widen. Half of the total income went to the richest 10%, while the bottom half only received 11%.

Fossil fuel extraction and export, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, also magnify how wealth concentrated among a few, exacerbates poverty, socio-economic inequality and environmental degradation. In Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the richest 1% contribute 24% and 23% of total emissions in 2022, respectively, while poorer nations, despite their low emissions, suffer the worst climate impacts.

The pattern for big-emitting countries is the same as for individuals—the richest 0.1% emitted 437.5 times more per capita than the bottom 50% in 1999, a disparity that grew to 465 times by 2022. The richest 0.1% (496,000 people) emit as much as the poorest 50% (248 million people). The per capita emissions of the richest 0.1% in MENA is equivalent to driving around the planet about 56 times in 2022.

The well-worn trope is true: the countries and individuals who contribute the least, suffer the most.

We are not all in the same boat. The super-rich drive climate destruction and shield themselves while the rest endure its consequences. Vulnerable communities—including

women, refugees, and low-income workers—lack the resources to adapt. Women and girls in the region are set to suffer the most. The rising temperatures, drought and intensifying water scarcity will heavily impact the agricultural sector as around 50% of its workforce is composed of women. Furthermore, water scarcity will likely force girls to drop out of school as their unpaid work will increase due to requiring more time to collect water.[2] This increases their exposure to water scarcity, food insecurity, and displacement. This comes in the context of underfunded public services and the absence of public climate investments, which leave intact the underlying economic systems perpetrating the breakdown.

Climate justice demands accountability for both economic and non-economic losses, including cultural displacement and environmental degradation. However, decades of austerity have weakened public institutions, encouraged privatization, and increased economic inequality. The ultra-rich, often in government positions or capturing the state, resist redistribution efforts.[3]

The region needs inequality-busting policies that focus on redistribution, progressive taxation, and massive investments in public services. Bringing about a just, green transition requires significant public investment in infrastructure and services. The region needs at least US$570bn for climate adaptation and mitigation.

However, austerity policies that have formed the region's economic landscape for decades have reduced public spending on efforts to mitigate the climate crisis. Many countries in the region are not able to commit sufficient resources for social spending and infrastructure, and climate change will only exacerbate the need for strengthened health, water, energy and public sectors.

The solution to this lies in making those most responsible for climate breakdown pay. They are also most able to afford to do so. The richest 1% in MENA hold 48% of financial wealth, but tax evasion, exemptions and privileges for the rich drain public funds needed for climate action.

While it is important to recognize the historical and current responsibility of rich countries in the Global North for the ongoing climate crisis and the need for them to pay their climate debt, it is also imperative to recognize and expose the responsibility of the wealthiest individuals within countries, in exacerbating the climate calamity and burning through the region and the planet with their polluting investments and unsustainable lifestyles and consumption patterns.

To prevent further climate breakdown, governments in MENA, international institutions, and Global North nations must take transformative action. A reversal of austerity policies and bold climate policies are essential for a just transition.

Governments in the region must:

Curb the Emissions of the Richest

- Develop and enforce ambitious national climate plans aligned with the Paris Agreement, including phasing out fossil fuels and supporting low- and middle-income households.
- Tax the income and wealth on the richest 1% to curb excessive emissions and economic inequality.
- Charge an additional higher rate of tax on wealth and (individual and corporate) income

from polluting investments to specifically target carbon pollution.

- Ban or heavily tax luxury carbon-intensive items such as private jets, superyachts, SUVs, and frequent air travel, with punitive taxes of 90% or more.

End Austerity and Instead Invest in Climate and Social Equity

- Governments, supported by international financial institutions, must abandon austerity and increase investment in public services and climate action.
- Ensure free, universal, high-quality public services, including gender-transformative social protection accessible to all, including migrants and refugees. Simultaneously, public services policies must emphasize climate mitigation, adaptation, redistribution and participation.
- Invest in clean water, electricity, and sustainable public transportation to reduce reliance on polluting private transport.
- Set and implement economic inequality reduction targets, ensuring the richest 10% earn no more than the bottom 40%.

Regional solidarity and cooperation are needed:

- Redirect Bilateral Climate Finance: GCC countries, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, should shift their financial priorities away from investments in land-grabbing and polluting activities. Instead, they should allocate resources to renewable energy with access to energy for poor communities, adaptation efforts within the MENA region and the provision of substantial investment in a just energy transition for the other countries in the region.
- Enhance Technology and Knowledge Transfer: GCC countries, and those receiving significant climate finance, should lead in sharing technological expertise and best practice.
- Support the Fund for responding to Loss and Damage: Wealthy countries in the region need to champion the Loss and Damage Fund and make significant contributions.

Rich Countries Must Pay Their Climate Debt

- They must compensate for the harm they have caused to countries in the Global South, including MENA, for their historical and current pollution. Furthermore, they need to cancel the debt owed by countries in the region and substantially increase their support for climate action through grants and not by saddling nations with debt.
- Rich historical polluting countries are responsible for limiting the global temperature increase to below 1.5 as per the Paris Agreement. They need to phase out fossil fuels faster than others in a way that is fair and just and phase in renewable energy. The current economic model is creating more energy and resource inequality so countries with energy scarcity must be supported by those who are exploiting their resources.

1. Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is grappling with the twin crises of inequality and climate change.[4] The wars plaguing the region compound these crises along with the legacy of economic policies, which exacerbate inequality. The unfolding climate breakdown is fueled not only by the consumption of the richest and the emissions of their corporations, but also by the prevailing economic systems in the region. These have been shaped by decades of austerity that have starved the public purse of the necessary resources to mitigate and protect society, as public resources are channeled to repay debt, and the wealthiest capture public policy to prevent progressive taxation and redistribution. While the wealthiest accelerate the climate crisis, they shield themselves from its consequences leaving the majority of people to grapple with it in a context of underfunded public services and an absence of climate public investment, while delegating climate solutions to technical fixes and innovations leaving intact the underlying economic systems perpetrating the climate breakdown. These dynamics are witnessed both within countries and between countries as the wealthiest nations in the region are the ones contributing the most, especially as they run fossil fuel economies.

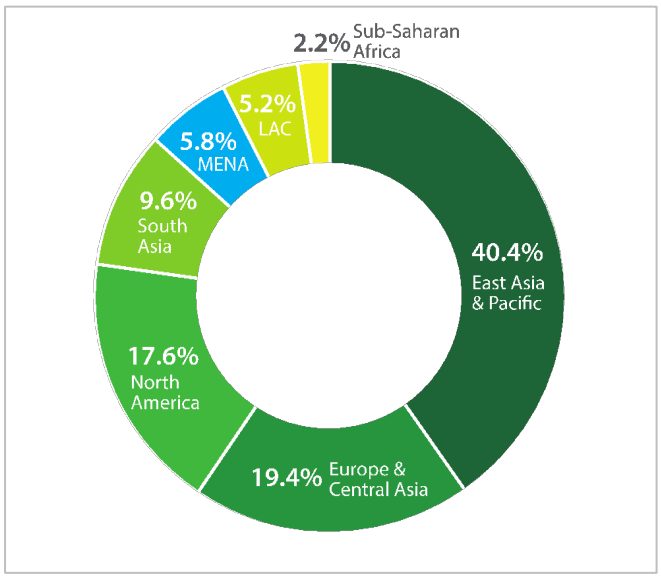
Fossil fuel extraction and export, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, has led to significant wealth for some while exacerbating socio-economic inequalities and environmental degradation. The stark disparities between wealthy GCC nations and less affluent countries highlights the need for a shift towards green and renewable energy to address both economic and climate challenges. The richest individuals and nations, who contribute disproportionately to emissions, often remain insulated from climate impacts, while the poorest, who contribute the least, suffer the most. Addressing inequality and the climate crisis simultaneously is crucial, and it requires recognizing the historical responsibility of major emitters in creating these challenges.

Addressing the existential climate crisis in the Middle East and North Africa is inseparable from tackling the extreme inequalities in the region and globally. Robust inequality-busting policies, such as redistributive policies, progressive taxation, and massive investment in public services that break the vicious austerity paradigm, are at the heart of achieving a just climate transition in the region. These significant and radical shifts require the transformation of economies in the region, especially fossil fuel dependence in the richest countries shaping the economies of the whole region. Rich countries in the Global North and international financial institutions have a historic responsibility to empower MENA countries to enact such vital policies instead of increasing austerity and debt.

2. The rich polluters and everyone else

2.1 Global Framing: MENA Emissions and Impacts

Figure 1: Consumption-based emissions, 2019 (broken down by regional share)



Source: Oxfam and SEI, 2019

Country Categorization: World Bank, 2023.

A global overview of the region's consumption emissions might paint a reasonable picture - as of 2019, the region's population constituted around 6% of the world's population, which was proportional to its emissions, accounting for 5.8% of global consumption-based emissions.[5] This does not imply that all is well. On the contrary, this picture obscures intra-regional inequalities and responsibilities in terms of the climate crisis.

First, the MENA region is a major producer of fossil fuels, supplying 31% of the world's oil and 17% of its natural gas.[6] It is home to four of the world's top 10 oil producers – Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait – and two of the top 20 gas producers - Qatar and Algeria. This extensive production not only fuels the economies of other high-emitting countries but also has a profound impact on global consumption-based carbon emissions.

This dual role as both a major producer and a significant consumer of fossil fuels complicates the region's emissions profile and underscores its global impact. While the region is integral to the global energy supply, the consumption-based emissions figures

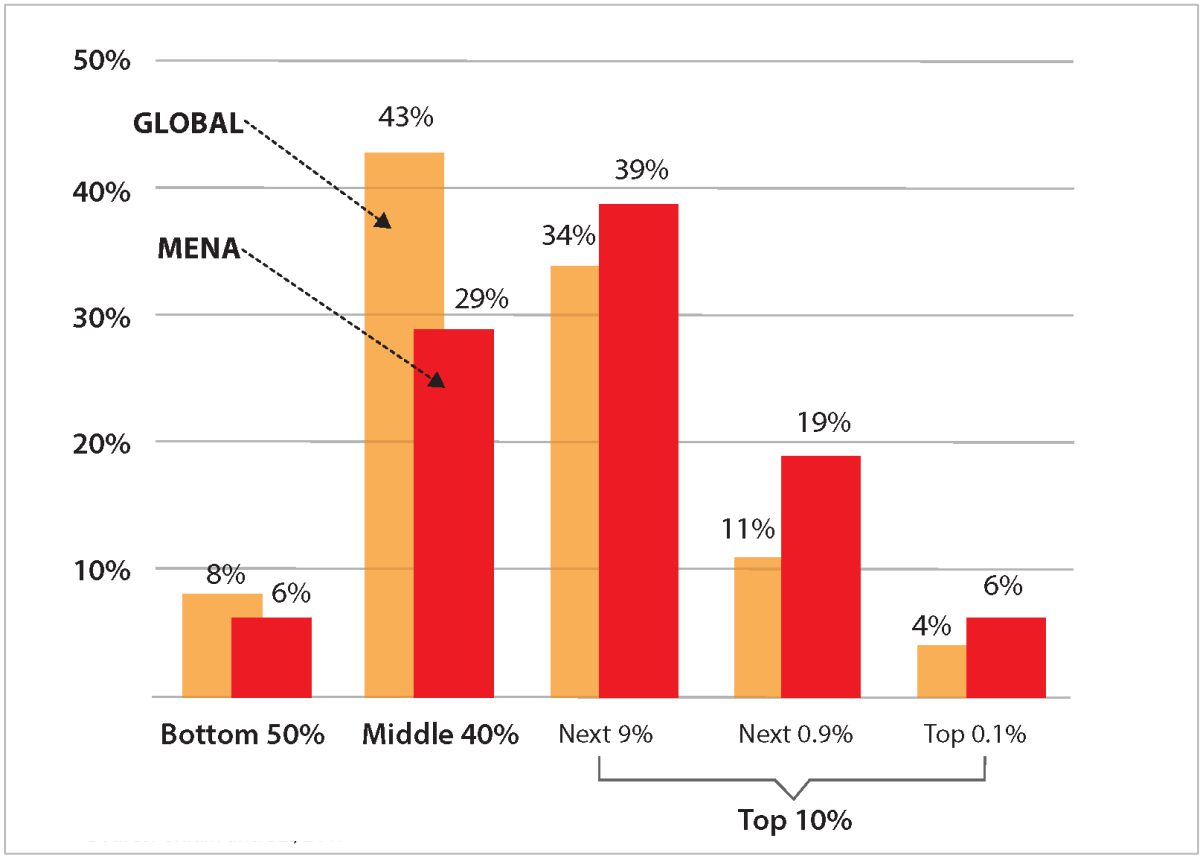
reveal the fossil fuel industry's substantial domestic and international environmental implications.

2.1.1 Excelling in wealth and emissions Inequalities: MENA as a global leader

The MENA region is one of the most unequal regions in the world in terms of wealth and income. Half of the countries with the most significant growth in wealth inequality worldwide are in MENA, with six making the top 20 most unequal countries in 2020, up from just two in 2019.7 Recent evidence shows that wealth inequality in the MENA region surged during and after COVID-19. The number of millionaires in Dubai increased by 78% from 2013 to 2023, alongside a rise in billionaires.[8] These trends are mirrored in consumption-based emissions inequality, showing that inequality and climate crises are two faces of the same coin.

Indeed, everywhere around the world, the wealthiest are responsible for a significant share of emissions, but the disparity between the rich and the poor is even more pronounced in the MENA region. In 2019, the wealthiest 10% had even higher consumption-based emissions than the same income groups at the global level, with 64% of the region's emissions, compared to 50% globally.[9] The richest 1% in the MENA region were responsible for 25% of the region's carbon emissions in 2019, dwarfing the 16% contribution of the world's most affluent 1%.

Figure 2: Global and regional share of consumption emissions, per global income group, 2019



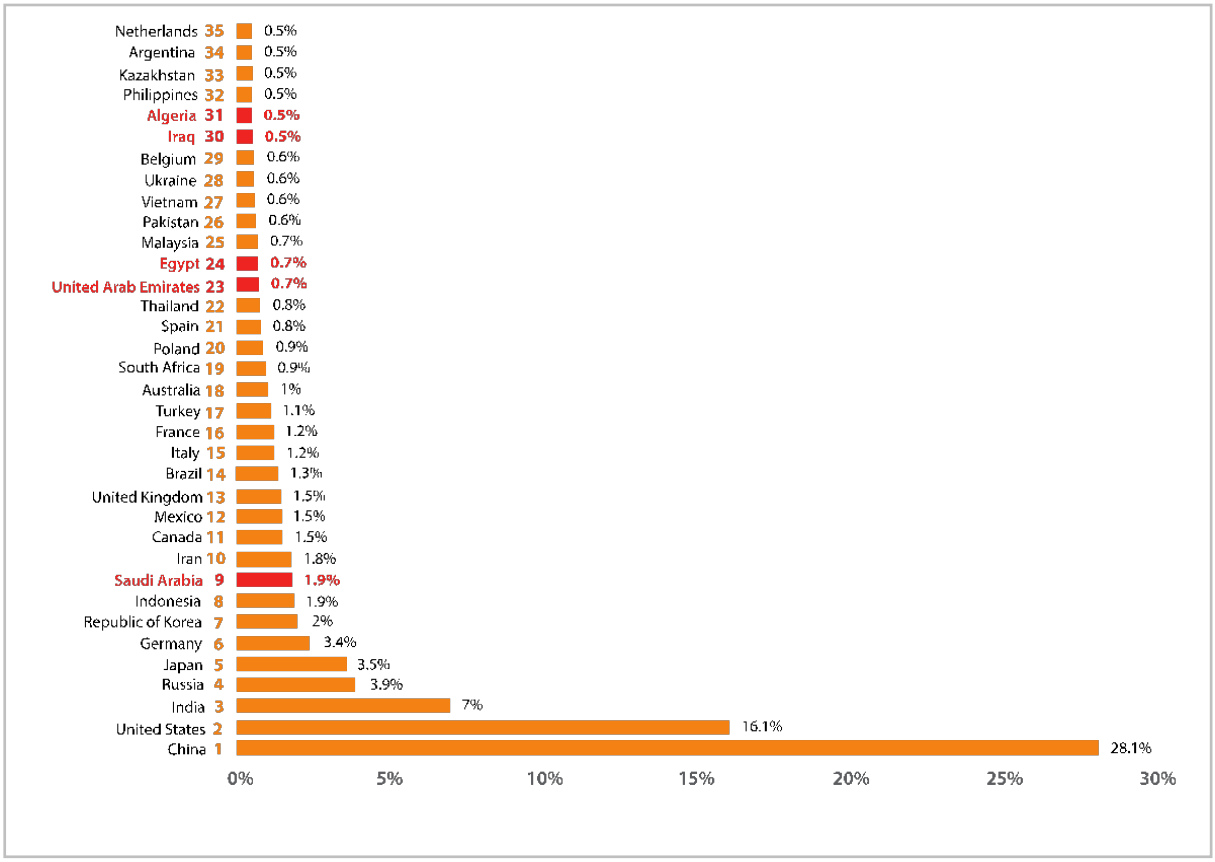
Source: Oxfam and SEI, 2019

The wealthiest within MENA produce a shockingly disproportionate share of consumption-based emissions. The richest 0.1% of emitters in MENA are responsible for a staggering 10% of the region's total emissions in 2022 and have an emissions per capita rate of 558 tCO2/cap[10]. To put this into perspective, the per capita emissions of the wealthiest 0.1% is equivalent to driving around the planet about 56 times.[11] The lavish consumption patterns of the super-rich contribute to these extremely high levels of emissions. Available information on five of the region's billionaires revealed that on average they flew in their private jets for 1,300 hours every year, akin to circumnavigating the world over 42 times.[12]

2.1.2 Country-Level Emissions on the Global Scale

Within the region, the wealthiest and most resource-rich countries in MENA are disproportionately responsible for most consumption-based emissions, relative to their population.

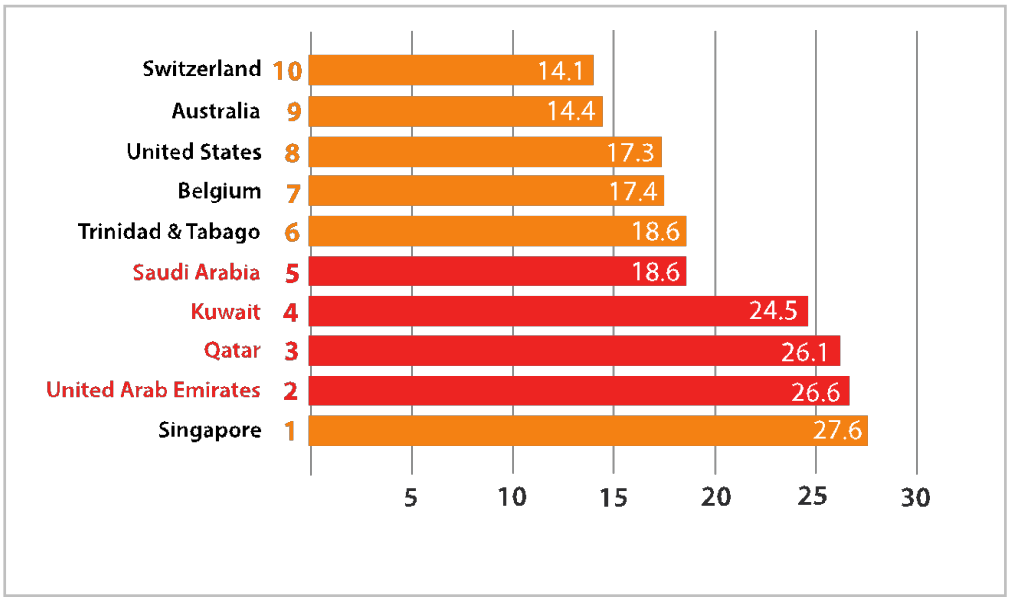
Figure 3: Top country shares of global consumption-based emissions, 2019



Source: Oxfam and SEI, 2019

The high emission shares and global rankings of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Iraq, and Algeria highlight their significant role in global emissions, driven by their oil and gas-reliant economies. Other notable contributors include Kuwait (0.29%, 42nd), Qatar (0.21%, 49th), Morocco (0.20%, 51st), Libya (0.20%, 52nd), and Oman (0.19%, 53rd). The remaining MENA countries contribute much less, with shares below 0.1% respectively. Among the countries with the highest rates of emissions per capita, four Gulf states (United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia) dominate the top rankings.

Figure 4: Top 10 countries with the highest consumption-based emissions per capita, 2019 (tonnes CO_2 per capita)



Source: Oxfam and SEI, 2019

2.1.3 Oil-Producing Gulf states exercising outsized influence

Oil-producing countries in the GCC exert considerable influence by investing heavily in various sectors using their oil wealth, amplifying their carbon footprint and the environmental challenges in recipient regions.

Over the last decade, GCC countries have collectively invested over US$100 billion in Africa. Notably, the UAE has emerged as Africa's fourth largest foreign direct investor, followed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This has recently included substantial investments by Saudi and Emirati corporations in mining, airlines/airports, and ports throughout the continent.[13] These investments often exacerbate socio-economic and environmental issues, creating a cycle of dependency and degradation. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have acquired millions of hectares of agricultural land in Egypt, Sudan, Morocco, and Ethiopia, disrupting local ecosystems and communities. Emirati-based companies have purchased over 1 million hectares of land in these four countries, equivalent to 13% of the UAE land mass, and Saudi companies have purchased over 1.5 million hectares, equivalent to 2% of its land mass.[14] Land grabs by rich GCC countries in Africa have contributed to displacing local communities, limiting access for farmers to farmland, and in some instances, sparking local tensions. Some of these African countries have also been facing food insecurity and hunger [15][16].

Within the region, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have contributed to exacerbating conflicts, worsening humanitarian crises and environmental degradation. For example, the military intervention in Yemen, which began in 2015, and the ensuing ground operations, resulted in heavy civilian casualties, destruction of civilian infrastructure, displacement, severe food insecurity and cholera outbreaks.[17]

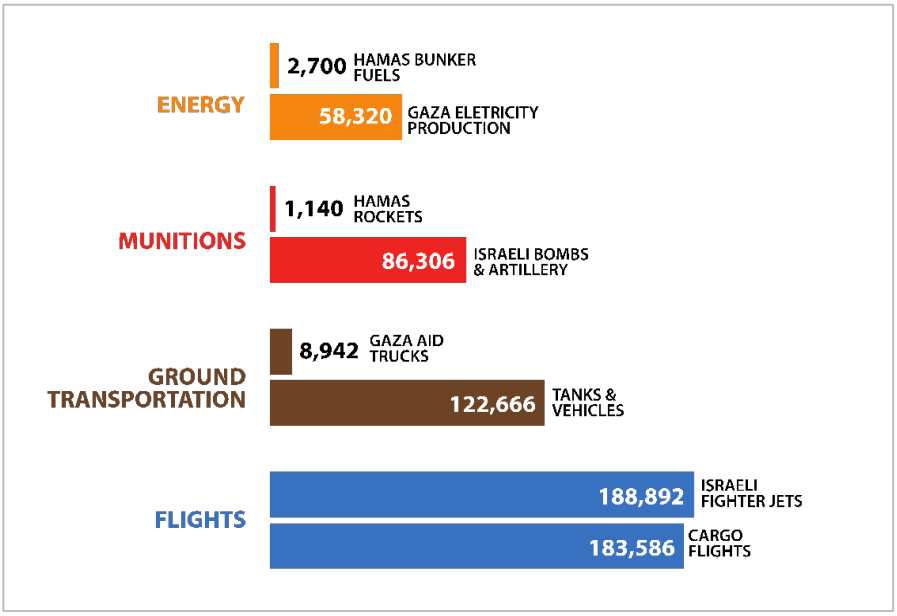
Box 1: Country Spotlight: Crisis, Conflict, and Emissions: The Unaccounted Impact of Wars on Emissions and the Inequality Impact of Conflict on Emissions: The Climate Cost of the first 120 days of Israel's onslaught on Gaza and war on Lebanon

Israel's invasion of the Gaza strip has caused extensive environmental damage. Over 99% of the emissions are attributed to Israel's aerial bombardment and ground invasion. This underscores the direct human cost with at least 48,000 Palestinians killed by Israel in Gaza, as well as the environmental cost of Israel's military operations, including starvation and the widespread destruction of Gaza's infrastructure and agricultural fields. Israel has replicated this scenario, to a certain extent, in Lebanon. The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) notes the damage to water, sanitation, hygiene systems, air quality, waste management, and contamination from munitions, along with the destruction of environmental management and renewable energy systems, resulting in millions of tons of debris.[18]

In Lebanon, up until November 2023, Israel's attacks had burned and destroyed approximately 47.000 olive trees.[19] The Lebanese National Center for Scientific Research, stated that Israel had committed an "Ecocide" in Lebanon, by burning more than 2,000 hectares of land and had disrupted agricultural activities across approximately 130,000 hectares, severely impacting farmers' livelihoods, livestock and national food security.[20]

This has also raised greenhouse gas emissions in the occupied Palestinian territory. A recent study found that the first 120 days of the war in Gaza alone contributed 420,265 - 652,552 tons of CO_2 emissions,[21] which is the equivalent of approximately 50 percent of Oslo's annual emissions in 2020.[22]

Figure 5: Breakdown of carbon emissions generated during the first 120 days of warfare, in tonnes of CO_2

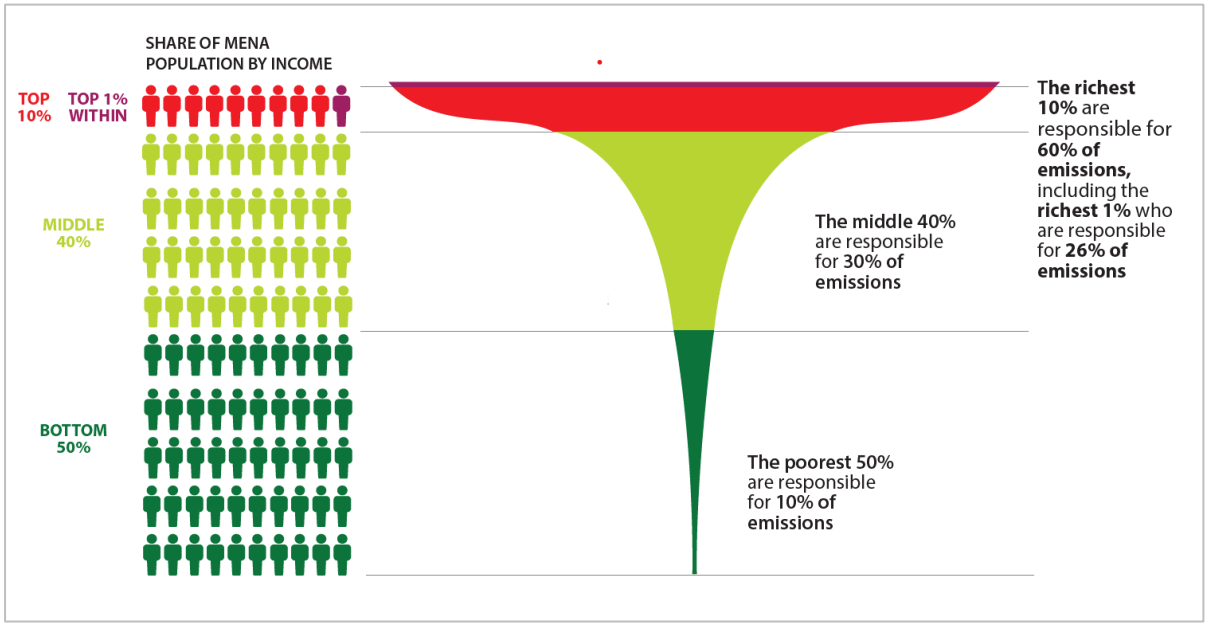


Source: Neimark et al. (2024). A multitemporal snapshot of greenhouse gas emissions from the Israel-Gaza conflict. Available at SSRN 4684768.

Rebuilding Gaza will further increase emissions. It is estimated that rebuilding at least 200,000 destroyed buildings will produce at least 60 million tons of carbon dioxide.[23] These estimates offer only a limited view of the war's carbon footprint. The actual impact is likely higher and underreported. The carbon costs of war are often downplayed and underestimated, alongside broader humanitarian and environmental effects.

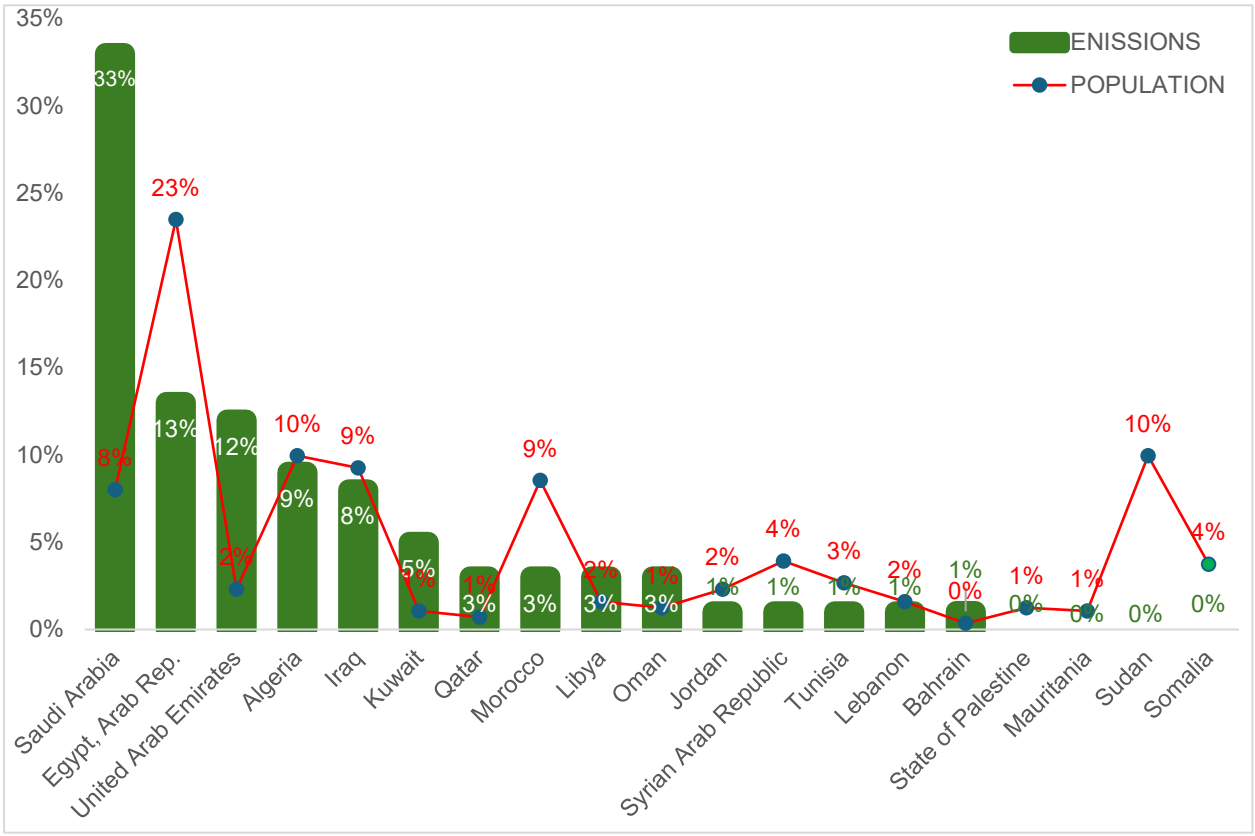
2.2 Emissions and Wealth Inequality: hand in hand within MENA

Figure 6: Share of consumption-based CO_2 emissions in MENA, 2022



Source: Oxfam and SEI, 2025

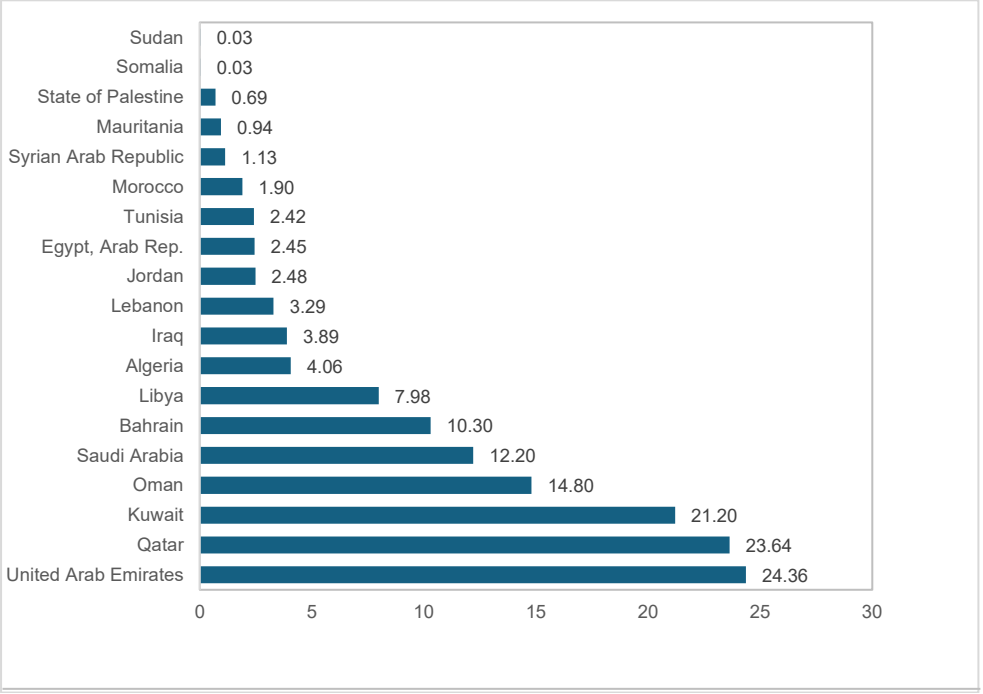
Figure 7: Country share of MENA consumption-based emissions and population, 2022



Source: Oxfam and SEI, 2025

High-income, fossil fuel-producing countries and populous countries such as Egypt and Iraq were responsible for most of the MENA region's CO_2 emissions in 2022. Saudi Arabia, with the largest share, produced 33% of the region's consumption-based emissions, while Egypt, with the largest population, contributed only 23%. When considering emissions per capita, the differences are even greater. Countries like the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait, among the least-populated countries in the region, have significantly higher per capita emissions compared to the single-digit emissions per capita of the most populous countries in the region.

Figure 8: Consumption-based emissions per capita, 2022 (tonnes CO_2 per capita)



Source: Oxfam and SEI, 2025

In 2022, the high-income GCC countries (which make up only 14% of the region's population) were responsible for 57% of the MENA region's CO2 emissions, while the low-income countries (which make up 24% of the population) were responsible for less than 1% of the region's emissions.

Table 1: Summary of emissions and population per country income levels[24]

Income Level	Countries	Regional Emissions Share	Regional Population Share	Emissions per Capita (tonnes CO2/capita)
High Income	Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates	57%	14%	21.2
Upper Middle Income	Algeria, Iraq, Libya	20%	21%	4.3
Lower Middle Income	Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Tunisia	21%	41%	2.28
Low Income	Sudan, Somalia, Syria	1%	20%	0.3

Source: Oxfam and SEI, 2025

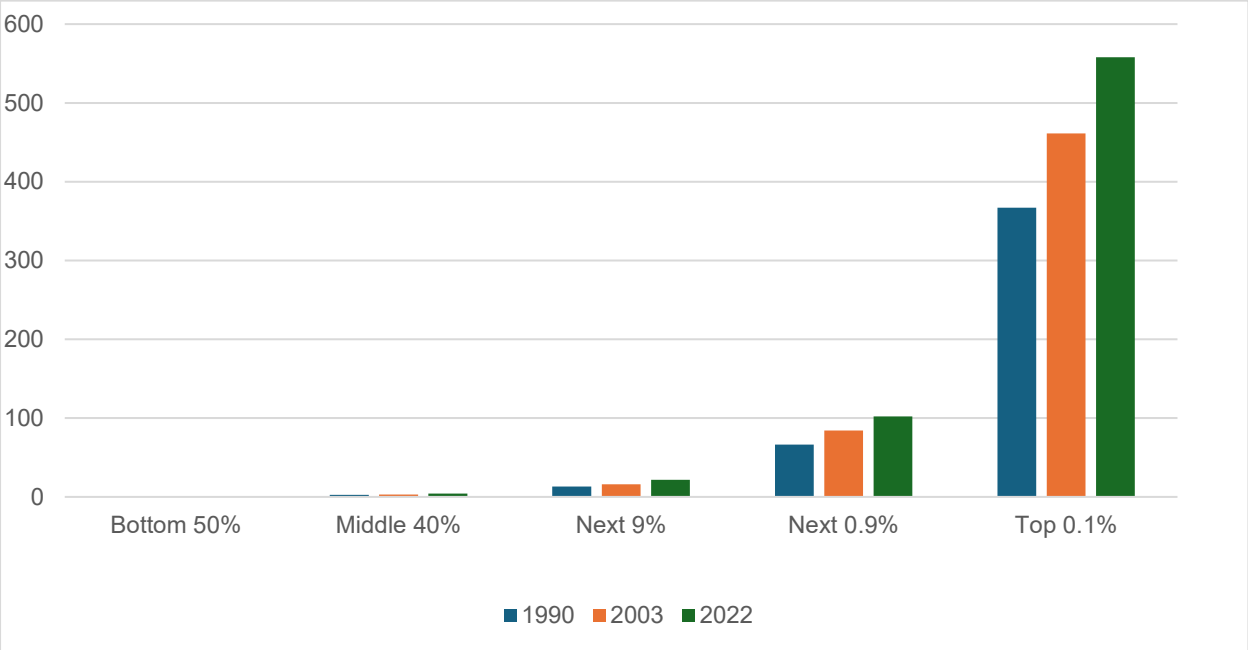
The disparity in CO_2 emissions within the region starkly highlights the inequality between different countries. Table 2 demonstrates the uneven distribution of resources and responsibilities, with the wealthier nations contributing disproportionately to the region's carbon footprint while poorer nations contribute the least.

In the high-income GCC nations, the wealthiest 1% account for a substantial share of total emissions, ranging from 21% in Qatar to 24% in Bahrain. A similar trend is observed in middle-income countries, where the richest 1% contribute between 15% in Iraq and 20% in Tunisia, reflecting an emissions-heavy consumption pattern. Meanwhile, in low-income countries, the overall emissions are low, and thus, the inequality in emissions is less pronounced. Despite their minimal contributions to emissions, these countries are more vulnerable to climate change's impacts.

2.2.1 The Overconsumption of the Rich and Super-Rich in MENA

From 1990 to 2022, the super-rich 1% in MENA burned through over three times as much carbon as the bottom half of the population. The growth rates in emissions among higher income groups, particularly the richest 1%, highlight a disproportionate increase, further widening the emissions gap between the wealthiest and bottom income groups. This is a stark indicator that emissions and wealth and income inequalities go hand in hand.

Figure 9: MENA region change in consumption-based emissions per income group, 1990-2022 (tonnes CO_2 per capita)



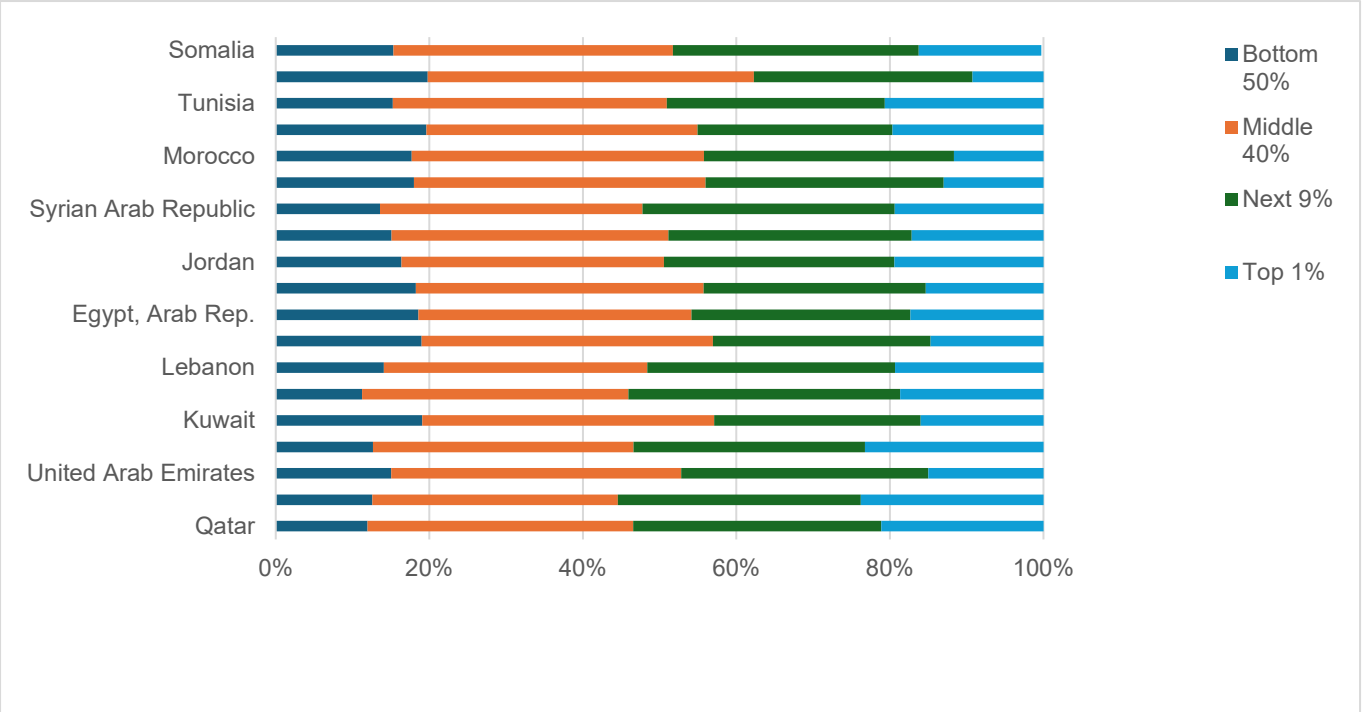
Source: Oxfam and SEI, 2025

In 2022, the richest 0.1% emitted 477 times more per capita than the bottom 50%.

High-income GCC countries have the highest concentration of emissions, with the richest 1% in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar accounting for 24%, 23%, and 21% of national emissions, respectively, in 2022. Similarly, middle-income countries with high levels of inequality, such as Lebanon and Egypt, show comparable trends, where the wealthiest 1% are responsible for

19% and 17% of emissions, respectively. Overall, the region registers stark levels of climate inequality as emissions are concentrated in the hands of the super-rich. The richest 0.1% (496,000 people) emit as much as the poorest 50% (248 million people).

Figure 10: Percent of total consumption-based country emissions by income group, 2022



Source: Oxfam and SEI, 2025

Concentration of Wealth from Fossil Fuels

The way wealth from fossil fuel extraction and other high-emission industries is concentrated among the wealthiest individuals and high-income countries is a significant factor in driving higher consumption rates and, consequently, higher emissions.

- Wealthiest 0.1%: The richest 0.1% in the MENA region have increased their fortunes over the years. For instance, in Qatar, assets for the richest 0.1% increased from US$952.58 per capita in 1990 to US$3724.77 per capita in 2019, while the bottom 50% remained at US$0 throughout this period.[25]
- High-Income Countries: The GCC countries have experienced significant economic growth due to their oil and gas production. This has led to substantial wealth accumulation, often held in sovereign wealth funds (SWFs), which supports higher consumption levels and investments in high-emission activities both domestically and abroad. For example, an increase in oil prices from US$80 to more than US$120 in response to the COVID-19 recovery and Russia's invasion of Ukraine generated a US$100bn fiscal surplus for GCC countries in 2022.[26] With this boom, mergers and acquisitions activity in the region, led primarily by sovereign wealth funds, increased by about 39% in 2022.[27]

These extreme levels of wealth inequality and concentration not only drastically increase emissions in the region but also poverty and hardship levels. As the super wealthy's consumption supercharges the climate disaster in the region, everybody else suffers the

consequences. These inequalities have made it even more difficult for the rest of the population to navigate the climate crisis, as they often lack the resources to adapt to and mitigate the impact of extreme weather events, water scarcity, and food insecurity. Meanwhile, the wealthiest, who are the biggest contributors to climate breakdown, can effortlessly pay to shield themselves.

3. Not everyone is in the same boat: inequality of impacts

Studies reveal that climate-related conflicts are more likely to happen in places where people are vulnerable, institutions are ineffective and it is difficult to access public services.[28] Climate scientists warn that tipping points will lead to sudden and intense climate impacts, potentially causing 3.4 million heat-related deaths by 2041.[29] Increased heat is also linked to higher levels of violence, from personal conflicts to large-scale wars.[30] The MENA region is especially affected, with temperatures rising 1.5°C over the past 30 years, more than twice the global average.[31] Problems such as water shortages, land degradation, reduced agricultural, animal husbandry and fishery production, rising sea levels, and epidemics caused by rising temperatures are now regularly affecting social and political stability, as well as regional and international relations. In 2011, uprisings in countries such as Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia were both directly and indirectly related to socio-economic problems, partly caused by climate change.[32]

In a region with an ongoing history of colonialism, conflicts, and tensions, climate change is expected to heighten security threats, worsening humanitarian crises across MENA and beyond. Evidence suggests that declining rural incomes play a key role in connecting climatic shocks and conflict risk in some countries, as well as violence in relation to climate shocks, which is more likely to occur in places where institutions are less effective, people are excluded from power, and essential services are difficult to obtain. These compounding crises and conflicts affect the most vulnerable in these communities in disastrous ways.

3.1 The people being hit the hardest

Climate change in the MENA region, as in other parts of the world, is leading to increased heatwaves, water scarcity, floods and limited access to clean water. The risk of conflicts and natural disasters leading to forced displacement is heightened.

Populations which have been historically and economically marginalized will suffer the most from the repercussions of climate change, which will amplify and exacerbate existing inequalities. Climate change increases their need for protection, but, in a region where adequate social protection and access to free, quality social services are already lacking, marginalized communities will face higher risks.

Women, nomadic groups, refugees, stateless people, internally displaced populations and migrant workers are all communities which suffer from structural and systemic exclusion from social protection, public services and proper healthcare and which face disproportionate risks from climate change. For instance, nomadic groups as well as displaced populations such as IDPs and refugees face greater risk of displacement from

rising temperatures, flooding, and severe dust storms since many live in informal settlements without adequate infrastructure and protection.[33] Migrant workers, particularly those living and working in GCC countries, face hard and life-threatening work conditions due to extreme temperatures. Poor or low-income women will also face higher risks from climate change such as accessing sexual and reproductive health services due to restricted mobility and the lack of a proper, free healthcare system. Women and girls in the region are set to suffer the most. Rising temperatures, drought and intensifying water scarcity will heavily impact the agricultural sector where approximately half of the workforce are women. Furthermore, water scarcity will likely force girls to drop out of school as their unpaid work will increase due to requiring more time to collect water.[34]

The fact that there are little to no official efforts and data to track the impact of climate change on vulnerable populations in the region, notably women, is extremely telling. This further indicates that discussions and policy considerations at the official level around this issue are focused on how to make the largest gains and how the wealthiest countries can place themselves and their rich resources in a world where industries and economic policies are shifting to extracting the most growth out of the green agenda. This only reinforces and feeds political and economic structures intended to maximize the benefits of the wealthiest while leaving everyone else to fend for themselves.

Box 2: Egypt: let the rich have light and darkness for everyone else

Egypt has been experiencing load-shedding electricity cuts since 2023, with power outages between two to three hours a day, with some parts of the country facing five or more hours of power cuts. The blackouts, which began in the summer of 2023 with increased demand for air conditioning, have stirred frustrations, caused interruptions for businesses, and led to several reported deaths.

Public frustration about planned electricity cuts has fueled anger, particularly during the summer when temperatures range from 40 degrees Celsius in Cairo to 50 degrees Celsius in the south of Egypt in Aswan.[35] The power cuts are not evenly distributed, with some more affluent neighborhoods in Cairo experiencing no power cuts, while lower income neighborhoods and some rural cities have power cuts for up to 10 hours a day.[36]

Power outages have hindered job performance and endangered labor and construction workers due to limited drinking water and increased heatstroke.[37] While the poor suffer from the lack of electricity, the rich in neighborhoods that do not have power cuts increase their air conditioning units further to survive the high temperatures, further increasing the elite's carbon footprint and increase in GHG emissions.

3.2 Water inequality

The MENA region is one of the most water-scarce regions in the world, with two thirds of the water supply originating outside the region. It is estimated that 83% of the population in the region is exposed to extremely high-water stress.[38] Many of the countries in MENA are at critical water scarcity and below the water poverty line of 100 cubic meters per capita.[39] Countries like Qatar import most of their water intensive products and commodities through 'virtual water trade' (a practice of importing water in the form of commodities), placing the burden of water use on the exporting country. Jordan and Egypt face severe water scarcity,

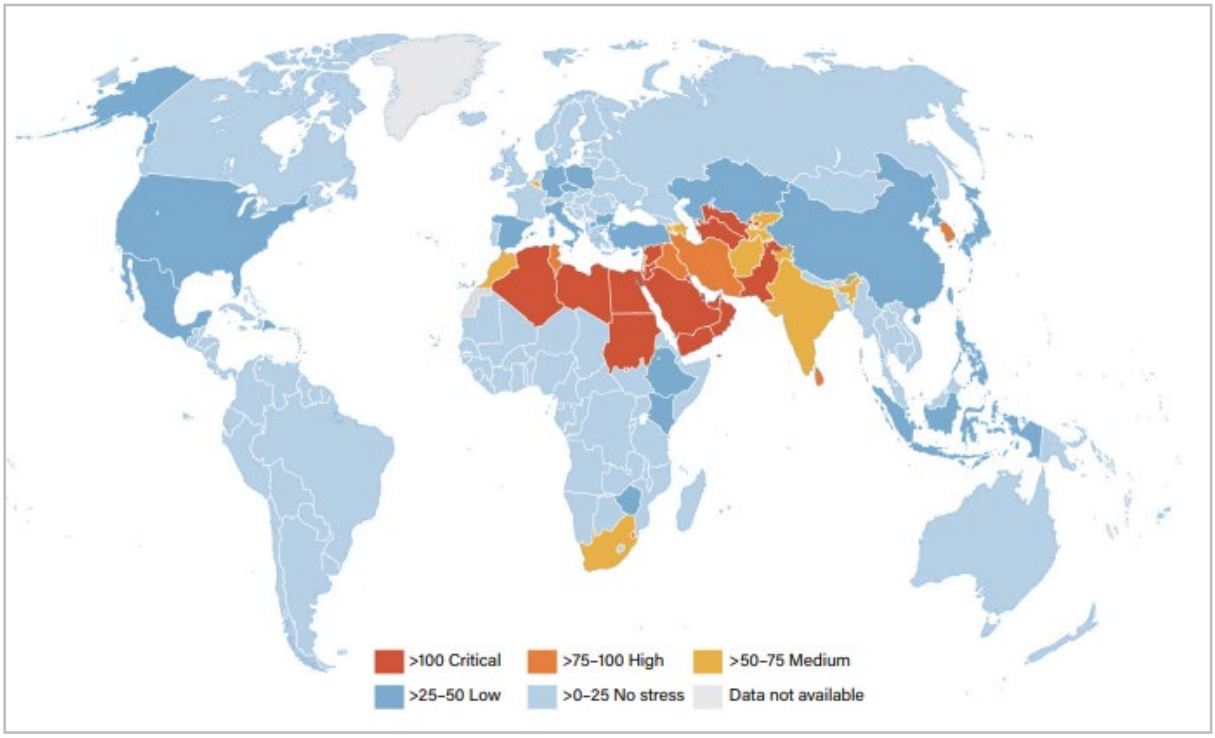
relying on transboundary water agreements from upstream river basins outside their borders, making them very vulnerable. Water inequality is growing within these countries. In Egypt, protests erupted in 2007 over water service disruptions in the Delta with claims that water was being diverted to tourists in a coastal resort.[40] By 2018, there had been up to 162 water-related protests.[41] These protests may resurface as Egypt faces a chronic water shortage of 7 billion cubic meters annually.[42]

Rural areas are often poor and lack basic services, while affluent areas receive ample water. There are over 40 golf courses in Egypt with an area of 40,000 feddans (41,520 acres) consuming 600 million to 1 billion cubic meters of water annually, which is the equivalent of the minimum daily amount of 50 liters[43] for more than 54 million people, while much of the agricultural area is left without water for food security.[44] Water distribution favors wealthy neighborhoods and their golf courses, and tourist resorts, with water tariffs rising by 100% between 2013 and 2018 due to growing concerns about water scarcity due to dams being built upstream on the Nile River in Ethiopia.[45]

Water consumption in MENA countries shows a stark contrast between the richest 1% and the poorer population. The wealthiest individuals tend to use significantly more water due to their access to amenities like private pools, large gardens, and higher standards of living. In contrast, the poorer population often struggles with limited access to clean water and may rely on shared or public water sources.[46] MENA countries are endowed with just 1% of the world's renewable freshwater resources. However, they have over 50% of the world's desalination capacity. But desalination technology is unequally distributed in the region where the UAE has 140 desalination plants and Yemen has none, due to the high cost and energy required. Consequently, inequities exist within and among countries in the region, reflecting disparities in adaptive capacity to water scarcity and energy security.

Water scarcity in the region is worsened by wars and conflicts. In Gaza, Israel has weaponized water in its military onslaught. Following the complete siege Israel imposed on the Gaza Strip, water supplies have been cut. This has systematically destroyed water facilities and obstructed aid, reducing water availability by 94% to just 4.74 litres per person daily – less than a third of the emergency minimum and less than a single toilet flush.[47] This puts Palestinians in Gaza at further risk of preventable death with limited safe access to water, let alone clean water. The ongoing war in Sudan has left the civilian population in a state of extreme famine, with half of the country's population, 25.6 million people, estimated to be facing crisis or worse levels of severe hunger and requiring immediate humanitarian assistance.[48] Water scarcity is further exacerbated by rising temperatures that are also causing deaths related to heat stress. Currently, heat-related deaths in the region are 2.1 per 100,000 people, with Egypt taking the biggest hit in absolute numbers where total annual heat related deaths is at a staggering 2591 people. Under a high-emissions scenario, it is estimated that annual heat-related deaths will reach 123.4 per 100,000 in the region by the year 2100.[49]

Figure 11: Levels of water stress and scarcity; freshwater withdrawals



Source: De Waal et al. (2023). The economics of water scarcity in the Middle East and North Africa: institutional solutions. World Bank Publications.

Box 3: Country spotlight: Saudi Arabia: 1,300 deaths from heatstroke during Hajj in 2024

Saudi Arabia is one of the wealthier GCC countries, but the events of the summer of 2024 highlighted its vulnerability to climate challenges. In June of that year, 1.83 million people from around the world made the Hajj (pilgrimage). This is traditionally one of the hottest months in Saudi Arabia, and despite new efforts to reduce heatstroke for the pilgrims, including constant air sprinklers cooling the air, several shaded and air-conditioned areas, and faster transportation, including high-speed trains, the Kingdom saw soaring temperatures above 50 degrees Celsius. Reflecting the broader pattern of unequal impacts, pilgrims with lower budgets and fewer resources faced the greatest risk of heatstroke, fatigue, and potentially fatal conditions. While wealthier pilgrims enjoyed air-conditioned tents and luxury meals during Hajj, those with more limited means endured severe and dangerous conditions. In 2024, over 1,300 Muslim pilgrims tragically lost their lives, primarily due to heatstroke, marking one of the highest fatality rates in a single year.

4. The impact of austerity

A just, green and resilient transition is needed for countries in MENA, requiring increased public investment in infrastructure and public services. As has been shown, the climate crisis cannot be addressed without tackling the inequality crisis and curbing the lavish emission-intensive consumption of the wealthy in the region. Nevertheless, for many decades, countries in the region have been locked in relentless and disastrous austerity-driven economic policies that have not only severely curtailed public spending but have also supercharged inequalities.

As such, many countries in the region have not been able to commit sufficient resources to address existing social spending and infrastructure needs. Climate change will only exacerbate the need for strengthened health, water, energy and public works sectors.

4.1 Public policies guided by austerity within an extractive unsustainable economic model

4.1.1. Public spending, debt, subsidies, and taxation

It is estimated that at least US$570bn[50] is needed in the region to finance the adaptation and mitigation activities identified in countries 'NDCs.[51] Furthermore, NDCs were not sufficiently inclusive, often failing to involve civil society and communities who bear the burden of climate change and the impact of climate transition plans. Governments need to improve the transparency of NDC decision-making processes in the run up to the 2025 deadline for revised NDCs and in the subsequent implementation process.[52] A 2024 analysis found that the annual funding gap to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on water and sanitation is between US$11 and US$12bn, a figure likely underestimated due to rising adaptation costs and unsustainable water consumption.[53][54] These massive spending needs for the region have not shaken the austerity policies adopted by most countries in the region for decades, backed by international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). On the contrary, while the region has witnessed massive winds of change from uprisings, democratic transitions, and conflicts, austerity seems to be the only certainty. As countries are in need of massive public investment in climate mitigation and adaptation, they are still called on to maintain austerity by reducing public spending.

Austerity is a recipe for disaster, as the region's history shows, especially when it comes to stepping up to address the climate crisis. As well as severely crippling countries' ability to spend on climate mitigation and adaptation, austerity places most people at acute risk from even minor climate shocks. Indeed, the underfunding of public services and inadequate or non-existent social protection fuels inequality[55], stunts progress and prosperity leaving people to fend for themselves and facing calamitous consequences as a result of any climate shock, as outlined above. In addition, austerity policies trigger regressive redistribution effects whereby resources are funneled to the wealthiest in society through governments cutting public spending to service exorbitant debt possessed by the rich,

through privatization and the sale of public assets to the wealthiest.

Austerity is also implemented through increased regressive taxation while cutting progressive taxes targeting high-income earners and their wealth exempts them from paying wealth taxes. For instance, personal income taxes are a significant tool to progressively mobilize public revenues but they yield less than 2% of GDP and 20% of tax revenue in MENA compared to the OECD's personal income tax revenue which accounts for 8.31% of GDP.[56] This is compounded by the fact that personal income taxes have steadily increased for low earners and decreased for high earners.[57] Meanwhile, the passive income sources of rich people also remain largely untaxed. Passive income includes profits from selling dividends, immovable property such as real estate, and movable property such as expensive artworks. Overall, taxation on this type of income is very weak, yielding less than 1% of GDP on average and is concentrated in oil-importing non-fragile states.[58]

Instead of countries in the region going for austerity as a solution for every crisis, they could raise significant domestic revenues to both finance climate action and reduce inequality. In the region, the wealthiest 1% have 48% of the financial wealth.[59] Yet tax fraud and evasion are rampant, especially among the rich, with significant revenue losses due to undeclared income and constant declaration of losses.[60] Oxfam has estimated that a five percent wealth tax on those who have US$5m net wealth and above in Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco and Egypt alone could raise USS10bn annually.[61] Jordan is an example of a country with a comprehensive set of climate strategies that also aims to reduce vulnerability and protect economic growth, but indicative estimates of the cost of this work suggest an annual financing gap of over JO$1bn (US$1.5bn) or 3.4% of GDP in 2021.[62] A 5% flat net wealth tax on individuals with a net worth of at least US$5 million would yield US$1.31bn annually which would cover 85% of the financing gap to implement climate action in the country.[63]

The relentless adoption of austerity in the region, especially when it comes to vital spending on people, has been justified by the need to address mounting public debt. Nevertheless, there has been little to no marked improvement in that regard. During the COVID-19 pandemic, debt rose from 47.6% in 2019, to 56.4% by the end of 2020.[64] Within the region, a significant divide exists. In 2023, oil exporting countries had very low debt-to-GDP ratios, below 20% of GDP. However, the debt-to-GDP ratios of MENA oil-dependent countries were nearly triple those of oil-exporting nations, at around 60 to 70% of GDP.[65] Even worse, in addition to Lebanon, which already defaulted on its debt in 2020, five countries in the region, including Egypt and Tunisia, are either in, or at risk of, a debt crisis.[66] As such, the situation is getting worse, especially when a significant proportion of public revenue is used to service external debt. Egypt used a staggering 42.9% of its public revenue for debt servicing in 2024, and 34.1% of public revenue in Tunisia went to external creditors, with the figure standing at 18.3% and 17.8% for Morocco and Jordan, respectively. A 2022 UNICEF analysis found that in six out of seven MENA countries (Djibouti, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen, with Sudan being the exception), debt servicing exceeded health expenditure, with Yemen, Lebanon and Djibouti spending over five times as much on debt as health.[67] Similarly, investment in education, important for raising awareness of climate change, building skills for a green transition and building adaptive capacity, is limited in Lebanon, Djibouti and other MENA countries, but data is lacking for all the nations in the study.

This sobering picture is a stark reminder that austerity hasn't, and won't, address debt sustainability in the region. Instead, it makes the situation worse. It also shows that funneling massive public resources towards external creditors only fuels the climate and

inequality crises. As such, countries in the region need significant debt cancellation and relief, coupled with progressive revenue-raising measures, so that the twin climate and inequality crises can be tackled before it's too late. This crippling austerity and debt spiral has made countries in the region engage in a dangerous gamble through relying on woefully inadequate external climate financing and the private sector.

Box 4: When lack of public spending hits the poorest: the case of water crisis in Basra, Iraq

In 2018, over 118,000 people in Basra, Iraq, were hospitalized due to water contamination, and because of this public health calamity, violent protests erupted. The Basra water crisis had been brewing for decades until it reached a tipping point in 2018. This wasn't a natural disaster, but it was mainly due to chronic underfunding of the water sector and a lack of investment. A Human Rights Watch report found that for decades, the state had failed to secure enough spending to build new water and wastewater infrastructure, let alone maintain the existing system.[68] Furthermore, there had been a failure to train public employees or employ enough people to maintain infrastructure and services.

As is often the case, this water crisis hit the poorest in Basra more than anyone else. The contamination of publicly provided water gave people no choice but to resort to privately supplied water through purchasing bottled water at inflated prices or use private water tanks. This constituted a hefty cost for poorer residents who had barely enough to make ends meet in their everyday lives, not to mention the increased cost of hospitalization, especially in private hospitals, as the number of people in need of healthcare skyrocketed. On the other hand, wealthier households were able to shield themselves as they had the private means to secure water, with some installing private water tanks and filtration systems or relocating.[69]

4.1.2. International and regional influence - role of IFIs and GCC

Over the past decade, several MENA governments have frequently turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to stabilize their economies. However, this has resulted in mixed outcomes, at best. From 1989 to 2023, Jordan signed nine IMF loan agreements, which required austerity measures, including cuts to social safety nets. Despite these measures, Jordan's debt rose from 80% to 111% of GDP over this period.[70] In January 2024, Jordan accepted a new US$1.2bn, four-year IMF loan, intended to further support fiscal consolidation while protecting social and capital spending, but the pattern of worsening conditions such as higher unemployment, limited social protection and increased poverty persists.[71]

The IMF is not alone in influencing the region. In Algeria, new hydrocarbon laws adopted by the government facilitated international borrowing and foreign direct investment, but also imposed harsh austerity measures, such as subsidy cuts and reduced public spending.[72] The GCC also plays a significant role, being a major source of foreign capital in Jordan, Egypt, and Sudan. The influx of GCC capital, driven by their oil revenues has often exacerbated regional emissions and economic inequalities.[73] Investments in Egypt, such as the UAE's $35 billion project on the Mediterranean coast, often prioritize real estate, which does not generate sustainable economic growth.[74] These investments support short-term financing needs but, in the context of Egypt, they also increase reliance on external funding and produce limited socio-economic benefits.[75]

4.1.3. The social and environmental consequences of business as usual

The persistence of high income and wealth concentration in the hands of a few is closely tied to the rise and entrenchment of an ultra-rich class. These elites, often holding significant governmental and parliamentary positions, work to protect their interests and resist efforts to redistribute wealth and income.[76] Decades of austerity policies across the region have resulted in cuts to public spending, weakening public institutions while encouraging the privatization of public services. Austerity policies have dismantled social protection systems increasing the reliance on informal labor, women's unpaid work and exacerbating youth unemployment, while simultaneously shielding the rich from paying their fair share of taxes, further entrenching economic inequality.[77]

A shrinking public sector has pushed millions of people – 60% of total employment in the region - into informal and precarious jobs that leave them with little or no social protection, increasing their vulnerability to climate change impacts and excluding them from green transition potential. Youth unemployment in MENA is almost twice the global average and in North Africa, about two thirds of workers are employed in the informal sector. In the Gulf states, more than half of the labor force are non-citizens, making it the region with the highest concentration of migrant workers in the Global South.[78]

The chronic degradation of public services in the region is a recipe for significant damage, with critical sectors like education and health unprepared for climate change. In 2024, the region experienced climate-related school disruptions affecting over 8 million students.[79] Furthermore water shortages and scarcity are affecting education where 31 per cent of the schools in the region lack access to water and soap and 15 per cent lack access to basic sanitation services. This increases the likelihood of health infections in schools, especially affecting girls who are at risk of these infections during menstruation.[80] This also has an impact in terms of schooling losses for children, especially girls. Furthermore, climate change is likely to put public health systems under severe pressure and they may lack the resilience to respond effectively. This includes the increase in dengue and malaria outbreaks, among other diseases.[81]

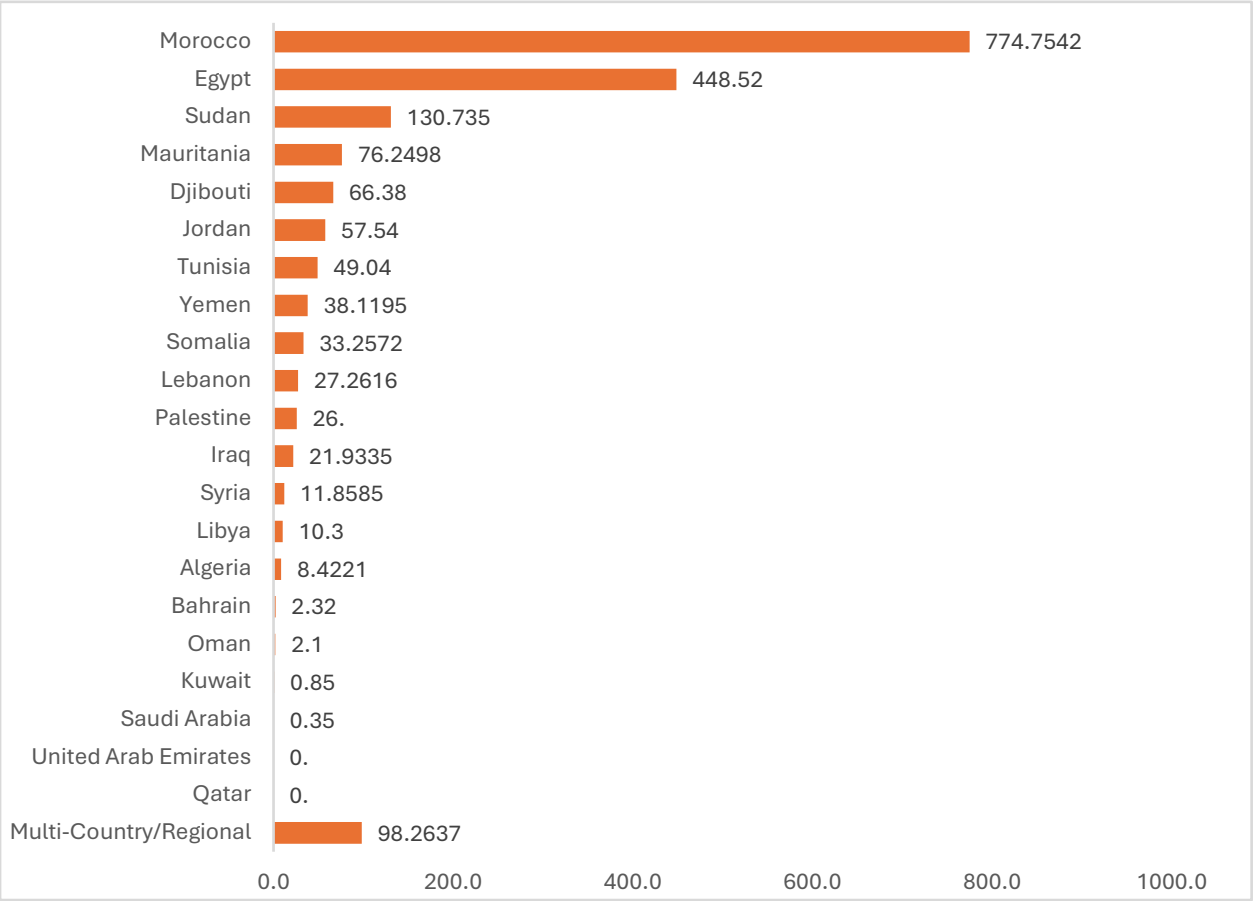
4.2 Elusive climate finance in MENA

International public finance, both bilateral and multilateral, is insufficient. Bilateral climate finance from European governments and regional donors such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, has been declining. Within the region, Yemen receives the most bilateral funding, although due to lack of funding transparency, it is not clear how much is allocated to climate-related projects. Multilateral climate finance from 2003 to 2021 totalled US$1.6bn for 153 projects, predominantly for mitigation (US$1bn) with significantly less for adaptation (US$340m) and crosscutting initiatives (US$120m).[82] While adaptation funding has been exclusively provided as grants, most mitigation funding (US$964m) has been allocated through traditional or concessional loans.[83] In most other regions, the Green Climate Fund is the largest funder, however in MENA, the Clean Technology Fund (CTF) has been the largest funder in the region with Egypt and Morocco being the largest overall recipients, receiving nearly half of all the funding in the region (28% and 19% respectively) whereas Djibouti and Yemen, the two LDCs in the region, have received less than 10% combined.[84]

Fragile, or conflict-affected states (FCAS), such as Yemen and Syria, have difficulties meeting the eligibility criteria for international financing from climate funds. They face significant challenges in securing sufficient international financing and lack domestic finance with the result that the countries with the most pressing needs are left underfunded and underprepared for the climate crisis.[85]

"Loss and Damage" (L&D), in the context of climate change, refers to the consequences of climate change that go beyond circumstances to which people can adapt. L&D can be divided into two categories. These are economic loss and damage which includes quantifiable costs, such as infrastructure damage or reduced crop yields, and non-economic loss and damage which encompasses impacts that are typically harder to measure in monetary terms, such as loss of culture, displacement and way of life. L&D is closely tied to climate justice as the world's most climate-vulnerable countries often contribute the least to greenhouse gas emissions. This raises critical questions about who should bear the cost of loss and damage in poorer countries with limited resources. At COP28, several countries, primarily developed nations, pledged around US$700m to the L&D Fund. Notably, the UAE (host of COP28) was the first country from the Global South to contribute to this fund by allocating US$100m[86], highlighting the potential for increased South-to-South cooperation on climate finance. This also underscores the disparity within the MENA region, where the UAE, a wealthy GCC country and major carbon emitter, can afford to pledge funds, while other MENA countries face severe L&D impacts without similar financial means.

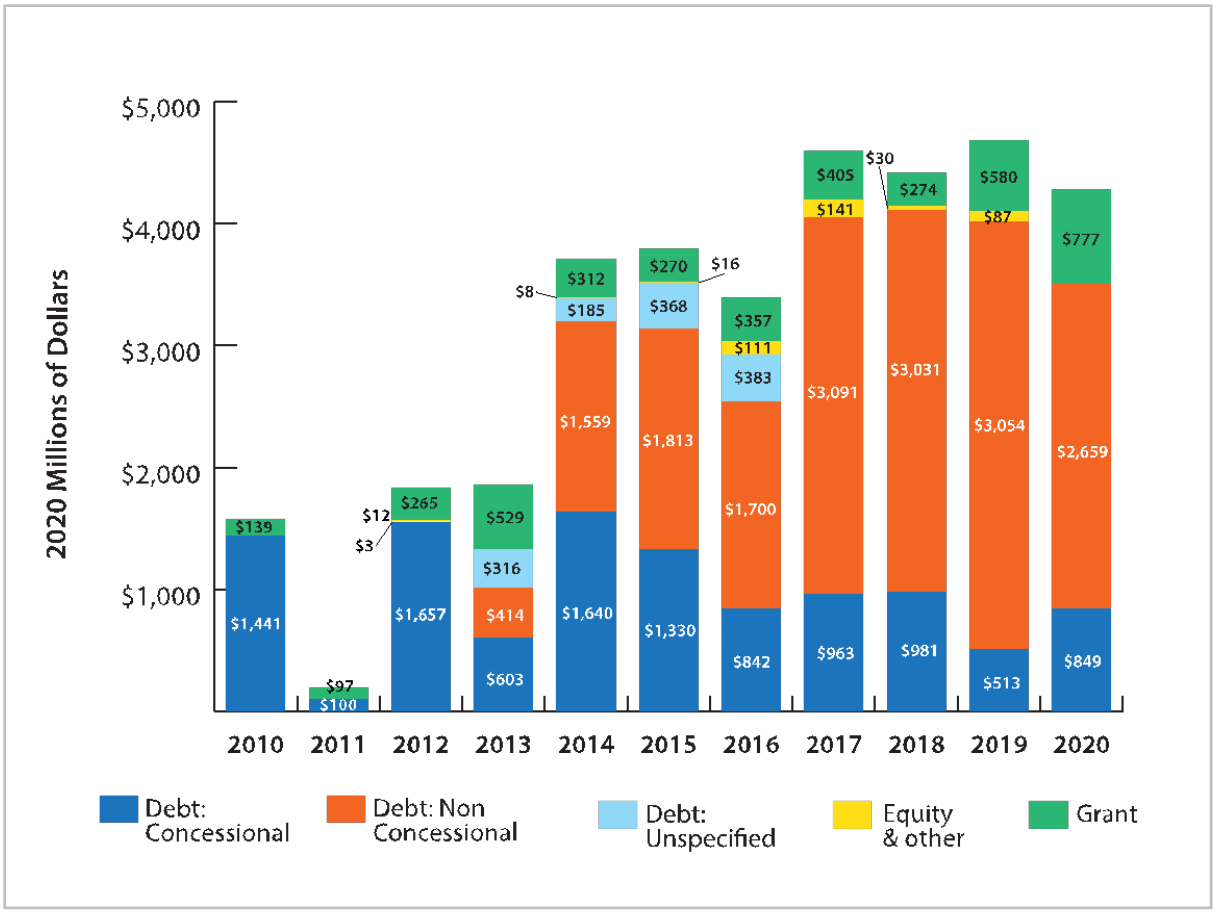
Figure 12: Climate financing amount approved for MENA recipient countries, 2003–2021 (US$m)



Source: Climate Funds Update, 2024.[87]

While at least US$570bn is needed for climate adaptation and mitigation, only US$34.5bn of the required amount has been raised for public international climate finance in the region, covering less than 6% of NDC requirements.[88]

Figure 13: Total climate finance in the MENA region by type of financial instrument



Source: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN ESCWA). (2022). Climate finance needs and flows in the Arab region.

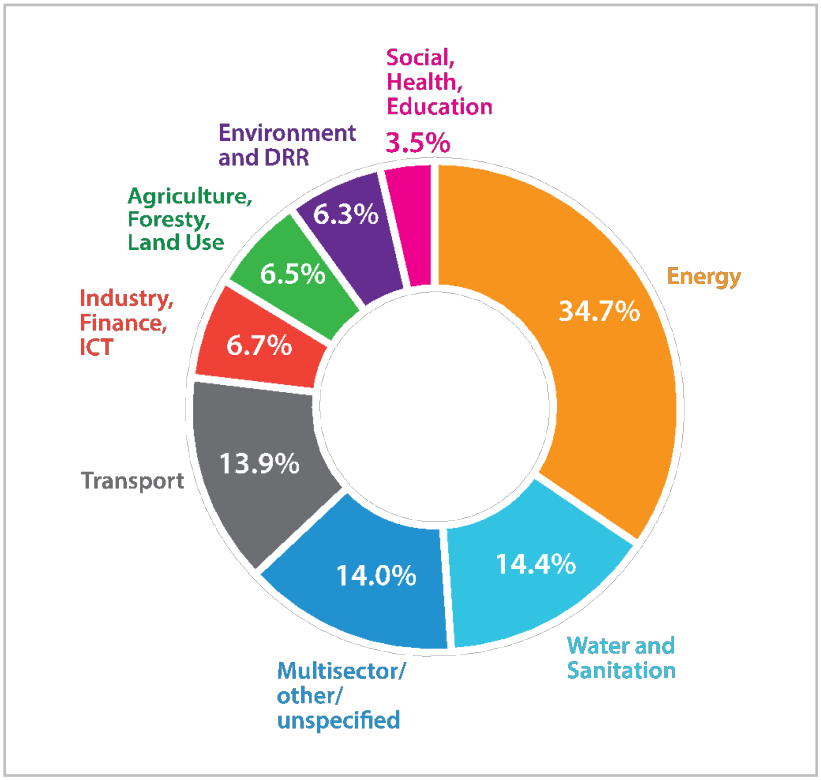
Box 5: Financing Morocco's Renewable Energy Push

Morocco's climate strategy, outlined in the Climate Change Development Report (CCDR), envisions a gradual decarbonization of its economy, targeting net-zero emissions by the 2050s. Achieving this decarbonization transition requires an estimated US$52.8bn in investment, with over 85% expected from the private sector. The reliance on external financing poses risks, particularly if accompanied by austerity measures that might undermine public spending on social programs. The CCDR also highlights the need for environmental tax reforms and water valuation policies, which could generate significant public revenue but might disproportionately affect the poor without adequate compensatory measures.[89]

The commitment to decarbonization, along with the risks associated with relying on loans to achieve it, is evidenced by major renewable energy projects financed by loans from international bodies like the World Bank and the European Investment Bank (EIB). Some of these projects have encountered financial difficulties and deficits which have been covered by public funds. Equally concerning has been the displacement of local agropastoralists like the Amazigh and the Sidi Ayad tribes who have had their grazing lands appropriated for these projects.[90]

Sector disparities in climate financing could exacerbate inequalities and further weaken social protections. From 2015–2020, the energy and transport sectors received 45% of all climate finance flows, while the water and agricultural sectors received a combined 22%, and social, health and education and disaster risk reduction combined received less than 10% (ESCWA, 2022). This mirrors and exacerbates the disinvestment caused by austerity measures, leading to reduced social spending and increased inequalities.

Figure 14: MENA public international climate finance received, percentage of total flows, 2010–2020



Source: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN ESCWA). (2022). Climate finance needs and flows in the Arab region.

There has been more traction for private sector finance being used for mitigation rather than adaptation globally and the MENA region is no exception. Exact data on private finance for climate action in the region remains sparse.[91]

Egypt's energy transition reflects a broader global trend towards privatization and corporate control of energy resources. This shift towards privatization, coupled with significant investments in renewable energy, often concentrates resources and decision-making power in the hands of private entities.[92] This dynamic can exacerbate inequalities and limit the equitable distribution of the benefits of energy transition.

Over recent decades, Egypt has suffered from electricity outages which have a greater impact on the most marginalized. In 2014, Egypt, encouraged by the World Bank and other international actors[93], ended its monopoly over electricity production by passing legislation that removed state subsidies for electricity tariffs. This made the energy sector more lucrative for the private sector and allowed Egyptian companies to obtain international commercial finance to build power stations. International finance helped to ensure the financial sustainability of the energy system's infrastructure, but it also transformed

electricity from a basic service to a commodity with increased electricity tariffs affecting both the middle- and lower-income communities in the country. The argument for removing the subsidies was based on the claim that they primarily benefit the rich and that these funds could be redirected to sectors that benefit the poor, but this met with little success.[94]

5. Conclusions and recommendations

It is now clearer than ever that the climate breakdown which is affecting both the MENA region, and the wider world cannot be addressed without also tackling the inequality crisis. It is not enough to recognize the historical and current responsibility of rich countries in the Global North for the ongoing climate crisis and the need for them to pay their climate debt. While this is necessary and urgent, it is also imperative to recognize and expose the responsibility of the wealthiest individuals within countries, especially in the MENA region, for exacerbating the climate calamity and burning through the region and the planet with their polluting investments and lavish consumption patterns.

Not everyone is in the same boat when it comes to the climate crisis. While the wealthy can shield themselves from it in many ways, everyone else is reeling from the impact. Very few people can spend their way through heat waves, water shortages and droughts, while most will have to survive based on what little means they have. The limited response, if any, of MENA governments, backed and encouraged by IFIs, has not strayed from the calamitous austerity policies which have persisted for decades and which fuel the inequality and climate crises. International efforts to provide climate financing for struggling countries in the region have at best, been a drop in the ocean, or, at worst, have intensified financial and economic stress through additional debt. As such, the only way to avert further climate breakdown and put countries in the region on the path of a just transition is a reversal of failed austerity policies. This means transformative and radical action is needed by governments in the region, international institutions and rich Global North countries.

Reduce the emissions of the richest

Governments in the region must take decisive action to drastically curb the emissions of the richest individuals in MENA. This means:

- Producing and implementing just and ambitious national climate plans to reduce emissions, according to the requirements of the Paris Agreement. These should include progressive measures to phase out fossil fuels and support low and middle-income households to cope with the transition to low-carbon economies, as well as measures to significantly reduce the emissions of the richest individuals.
- Introducing a range of permanent progressive income and wealth taxes on the region's richest 1%. These must be high enough to meaningfully reduce economic inequality because if the number and wealth of super-rich individuals grows, so will their consumption and investment emissions.
- Charging an additional higher rate of tax on wealth and (individual and corporate) income from polluting investments to specifically target carbon pollution. Rates should be high enough to disincentivize investment in polluting industries.
- Ban or punitively tax carbon-intensive luxury consumption, starting with private jets, superyachts, sports utility vehicles (SUVs), and frequent air travel.
- Governments should ban private jets and superyachts, as these luxury emissions

significantly contribute to climate breakdown. Such measures are appropriate and necessary steps to address the urgent climate crisis.

- Alternatively, luxuries should be taxed at punitive rates (90% or above). Taxes on such luxuries would disincentivize excessive consumption while raising revenue from the richest that could be invested in national climate plans.

Reverse austerity measures and invest in climate and inequality reduction

Governments in the region, with the support of IFIs, should put an end to their addiction to austerity and drastically increase investments in public services and climate action through:

- Providing free, universal, good-quality gender-transformative public services that are publicly financed and delivered, and provide universal social protection – to all, without discrimination including migrants and refugees – as a tool for reducing inequalities and building social cohesion.
- Increasing public investment in water and clean electricity, as well as safe and clean transportation systems that would reduce the need to use polluting private transportation systems.
- Setting targets to radically reduce economic inequality. The incomes of the richest 10% should be no higher than the poorest 40%. Countries must introduce policies to reduce inequality through participatory processes involving all groups within the population.
- In view of the climate crisis, ensuring that public services policies emphasize mitigation e.g. decarbonizing infrastructure), adaptation (e.g. expanding access and resilience in climate-vulnerable areas), redistribution (e.g. reorienting public spending towards inclusive and green services) and participation (e.g. by democratising planning and delivery of green public alternatives).

Regional solidarity and cooperation are needed:

With the rise of the far right across the rich nations in the Global North, it is time for South-to-South cooperation, especially regional cooperation across MENA. GCC countries, with their substantial economic resources, and as the source of most emissions, must lead on regional climate action by aligning financial and technological resources with principles of equity and responsibility through:

- Redirecting Bilateral Climate Finance: High-income GCC countries, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, should shift their financial priorities away from investments in land-grabbing and polluting activities. GCC investments in the region have significantly shaped the economies of receiving countries with a focus on real estate, tourism, and other polluting investments. Instead, they should allocate resources to renewable energy with access to energy for poor communities, adaptation efforts within the MENA region and the provision of substantial investments in just energy transition for other countries in the region.
- Enhancing Technology and Knowledge Transfer: GCC countries and those receiving significant climate finance, such as Egypt and Morocco, should lead in sharing technological expertise and best practice. This includes advances in nature-based adaptation, renewable energy, regionally appropriate cooling techniques, water management, and sustainable agriculture practices. Facilitating knowledge transfer will help to build regional capacity to tackle climate challenges, revive indigenous knowledge and improve access to climate finance.

- Supporting the Fund for responding to Loss and Damage: The UAE should continue to champion the Fund for responding to Loss and Damage, encouraging other wealthy countries in the region to make significant contributions. This commitment is crucial for addressing the climate justice and equity issues that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable nations and communities in the MENA region.

Rich countries must pay their climate debt:

- Historically Rich Polluters Must Pay: Rich countries must compensate for the harm they have caused to countries in the Global South, including MENA, for their historical and current pollution. Furthermore, they need to cancel their debt to countries in the region and substantially increase their support for climate action through grants, not debt.
- Rich historical polluting countries are responsible for limiting the global temperature increase to below 1.5 degrees Celsius as per the Paris Agreement. They need to phase out fossil fuels faster than others in a way that is fair and just and phase in renewable energy. The current economic model is creating more energy and resource inequality so countries with energy scarcity must be supported by those who are exploiting their resources.

Notes

1 Calculations based on the Forbes billionaires list of 2023 and 2024

2 Moneer, Z. 2024. Women and climate change in MENA: Turning adversity into opportunity. Middle East Institute. https://www.mei.edu/publications/women-and-climate-change-mena-turning-adversity-opportunity

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Oxfam is a global movement of people who are fighting inequality to end poverty and injustice. We are working across regions in more than 70 countries, with thousands of partners, and allies, supporting communities to build better lives for themselves, grow resilience and protect lives and livelihoods also in times of crisis. Please write to any of the agencies for further information or visit www.oxfam.org.

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