

Most people don't feel that global warming will affect them - but they are wrong

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Only a third of adults living in SA's metro areas feel that climate change or global warming will affect them much. This is one of the findings of a study conducted in September 2007 by South Africa's leading marketing and social insights company, TNS Research Surveys.

The company interviewed 2 000 adults in all seven of SA's major metropolitan areas in a study that looked at how people feel about climate change, their use of key resources and what their carbon footprint is.

Most people put issues such as crime, HIV/AIDS, corruption, poverty and unemployment, and poor service and housing delivery higher in importance than climate change as issues facing South Africa today. But Neil Higgs, Director of Innovation and Development at TNS Research Surveys said, "Although I am constant campaigner for poverty alleviation, better service delivery and job creation, I also know that, if we don't get together and work on reducing global warming, all these problems will become immeasurably worse within a couple of decades." South Africa is in the top 20 emitting countries in the world, contributing three times our fair share of carbon dioxide (compared with our contribution to the world's GDP). Higgs added, "We all need to start re-thinking how we run our lives energy-wise."

SA's carbon dioxide emissions doubled between 1980 and 2004. We are a much less carbon efficient country than other developed nations primarily because almost all our primary energy comes from coal. This coal is abundant and cheap and has led to South Africa having low electricity prices – making us energy extravagant. Efficient and plentiful public transport is also poor, leaving many people to use cars and taxis to commute.

The study found that poorer people are less concerned about climate change than wealthier people – not surprisingly, as, for them, the daily imperatives of poverty, a lack of jobs and poor service delivery leading to disgraceful living conditions dominate their lives. But, paradoxically, it is the poor who contribute less to global warming than the wealthy. The study found that poorer people tend to contribute less than four tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) whilst wealthier people tend to contribute more than nine tonnes with some reaching well over the 16 to 20 tonne mark. A few even reached 30 tonnes. In addition, no doubt because of their circumstances, poorer people tend to recycle and re-use packaging more, especially plastics. Overall, on average, 77% of people say that they do not re-use or re-cycle paper, cardboard, plastics, glass or cans.

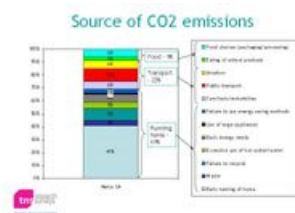
The largest contribution to people's individual energy use footprint comes from simply running one's home, this contributing 69% on average. Transport contributes another 22% and the food and packaging choices that one makes contributes 9%. This excludes the carbon we generate by the purchase of homes, cars, appliances, electronic equipment, furniture, clothes and other necessities of life, and the use of services such as banks, cell-phones, TV channels and many others. The figures given above arise simply out of the daily energy we use from electricity and other energy sources for lighting and heating our homes, cooking and washing, the fuel we burn in moving around, and the choices we make when we decide what types of food to eat.

What's up with those at the very very top end?

They are much more affluent and have a bias towards living in Pretoria or Cape Town, very well educated, aged between 35 and 49, white female working full-time, with no children at home.

What is wrong with their carbon habits?

They eat packaged foods, ready meals, frozen food and imported foods much more than average. They are quite likely to eat meat, fish or chicken most days, as well as other animal products. They dispose of much more garbage than average (three bags instead of the average of 1.5).



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They hardly ever recycle anything, are not water-wise and use municipal water on their gardens, which almost all have. They either take long showers or medium to deep baths, live in large homes with seven or more rooms (excluding passages and toilets/bathrooms), with two garages. They do make an attempt to save energy by turning down their geyser, and using energy efficient light bulbs but a third of them do nothing. They are the heaviest users of dishwashers, washing machines and tumble driers and tend to leave their electronic and electrical appliances on standby rather than switching them off.

They take the most local flights (20% take seven or more such return flights per year) and only a third don't take any long haul flights in a year - most take three to four such flights per year. Most travel more than 250 kms per week in a car in larger than average - they are also the most likely to be travelling alone in their car for most of these kilometres. Only 11% use public transport (the metro average is 67%).

Commentary

Climate change is regarded by many as the single biggest global challenge of the 21st century. But it is difficult for poorer people to see this in the light of more pressing problems on their doorstep – poverty, unemployment and lack of service delivery are of more immediate importance. For people higher up the socio-economic spectrum, the importance of climate change is recognised. But it is seen as just one of many problems to be faced in South Africa which is still in a state of transition and faces pressing problems such as HIV/AIDS, crime, corruption and lack of service delivery.

Nonetheless, it IS a global emergency. The lack of leadership by key countries such as the US and China contributes a sense of helplessness to the individual who also feel that this is a problem for governments and business to address. The need for awareness of the issue as well as the practical steps that individuals can take to help need urgent highlighting.

Wealthier lifestyles contribute much more to carbon emissions: the onus is on all of us but particularly the wealthier to take emission-reducing steps. However, there are other initiatives that we can consider:

- Building codes need to be amended to make the adoption of alternative energy sources mandatory in new homes – and given our sunshine levels, this would have an enormous effect on our CO2 emissions.
- Given the potential savings that can accrue, solar and wind power sources need to become more affordable, available and simpler.
- There are a whole host of simple things people can do:
 - Turn down geysers.
 - Switch off unnecessary lights and use energy-efficient bulbs.
 - Use appliances as sparingly and as efficiently as possible.
 - Do not leave devices on standby; do not leave chargers plugged in when not in use.
 - Re-use water (and collect rainwater) if possible. Keep showers and baths short and shallow.
- Recycling needs more infrastructure to work well: agitate for this. Re-using containers is easier to do.
- Share your car with others; use public transport more.
- Re-consider the need for flying (**especially business flights – use video conferencing more**).

- Buy more local foods in season rather than those flown in from far away; cut back on packaging or select packaging that can be recycled or re-used. Start demanding that manufacturers and retailers add the carbon footprint to labels.

This is also a wake-up call for manufacturers and retailers.

- Overseas, there is a move to add a product's carbon footprint to pack labels. Push for this.
- Cut back on animal products where possible – have vegetarian meals or even whole days every week.

We need to act now and become energy aware. We need to think about the resources that we use to maintain our lifestyles and work towards less resource-intensive ways of living.

Technical note

The study was conducted amongst a sample of 2 000 adults in the seven major metropolitan areas: the study has a margin of error of under 2.5% for the results found for the total sample. The study was conducted by TNS Research Surveys (Pty) Ltd as part of their ongoing research into current social and political issues and was funded by TNS Research Surveys. For more details, please contact Neil Higgs on 011-778-7500 or 082-376-6312.

Website: www.tnsresearchsurveys.co.za.

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