Sustainable consumption – whose responsibility?

Climate Thursdays, SDU, 5th November 2026

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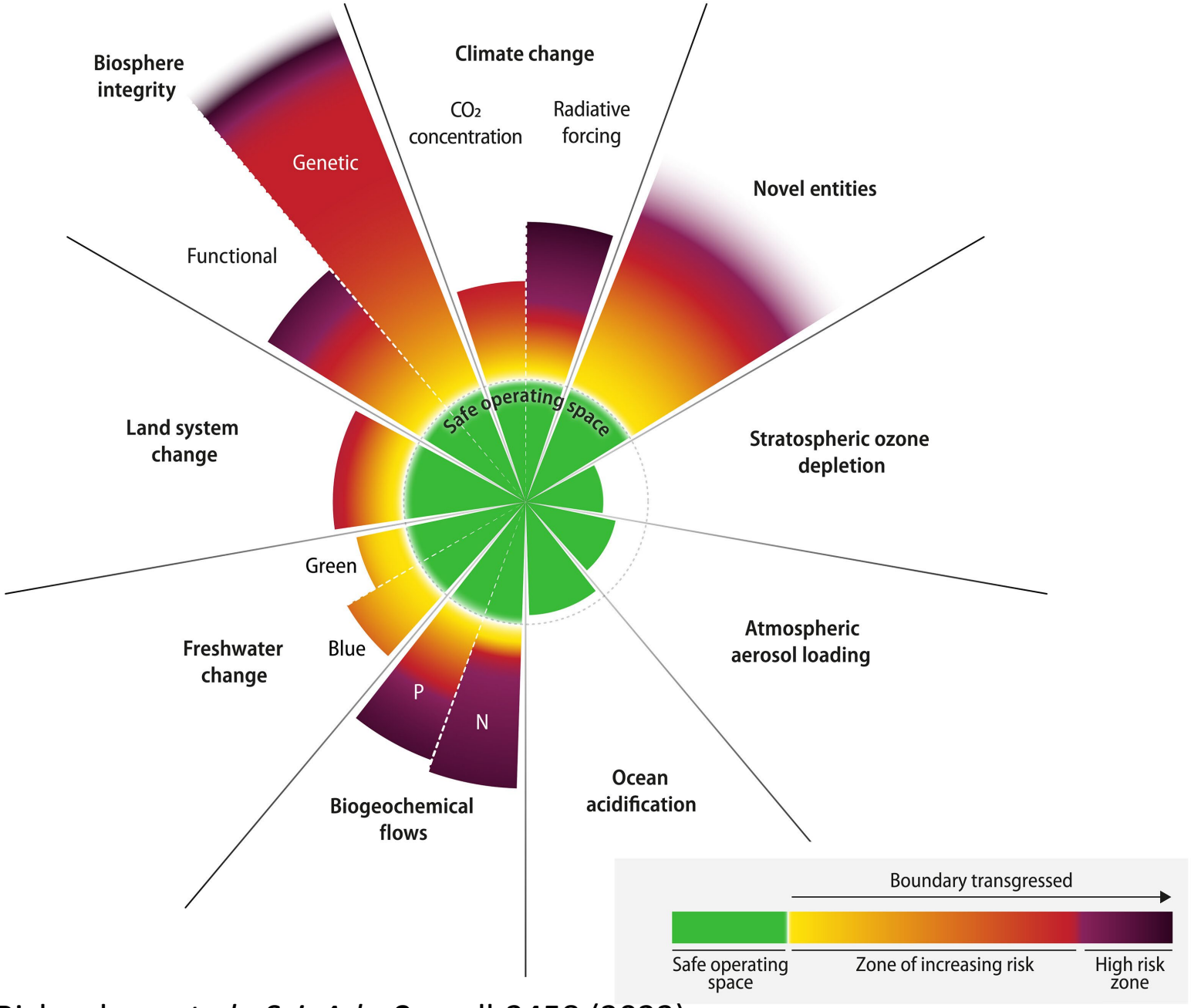
AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

The main message

Sustainable consumption: material consumption in high-income countries needs to be reduced

Everybody can contribute, but the **responsibility** is first of all political

The reasoning is based on ecological economics



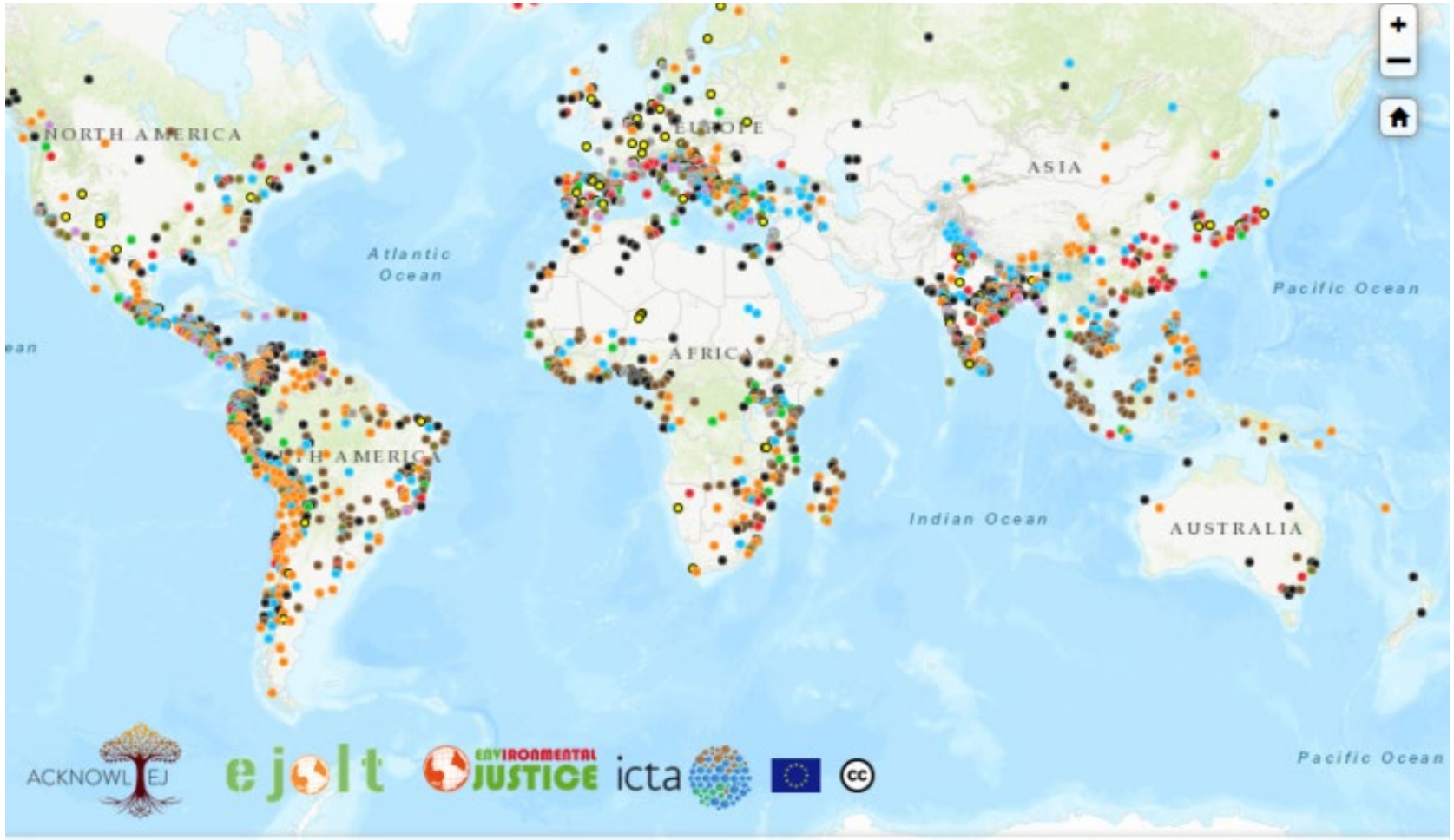
Richardson *et al.*, *Sci. Adv.* **9**, eadh2458 (2023)

Understanding the challenge, part 1

Still very reliant on fossil fuels, difficult to replace

Climate change is not the only planetary boundary

Technological solutions are necessary, but miracles are not likely

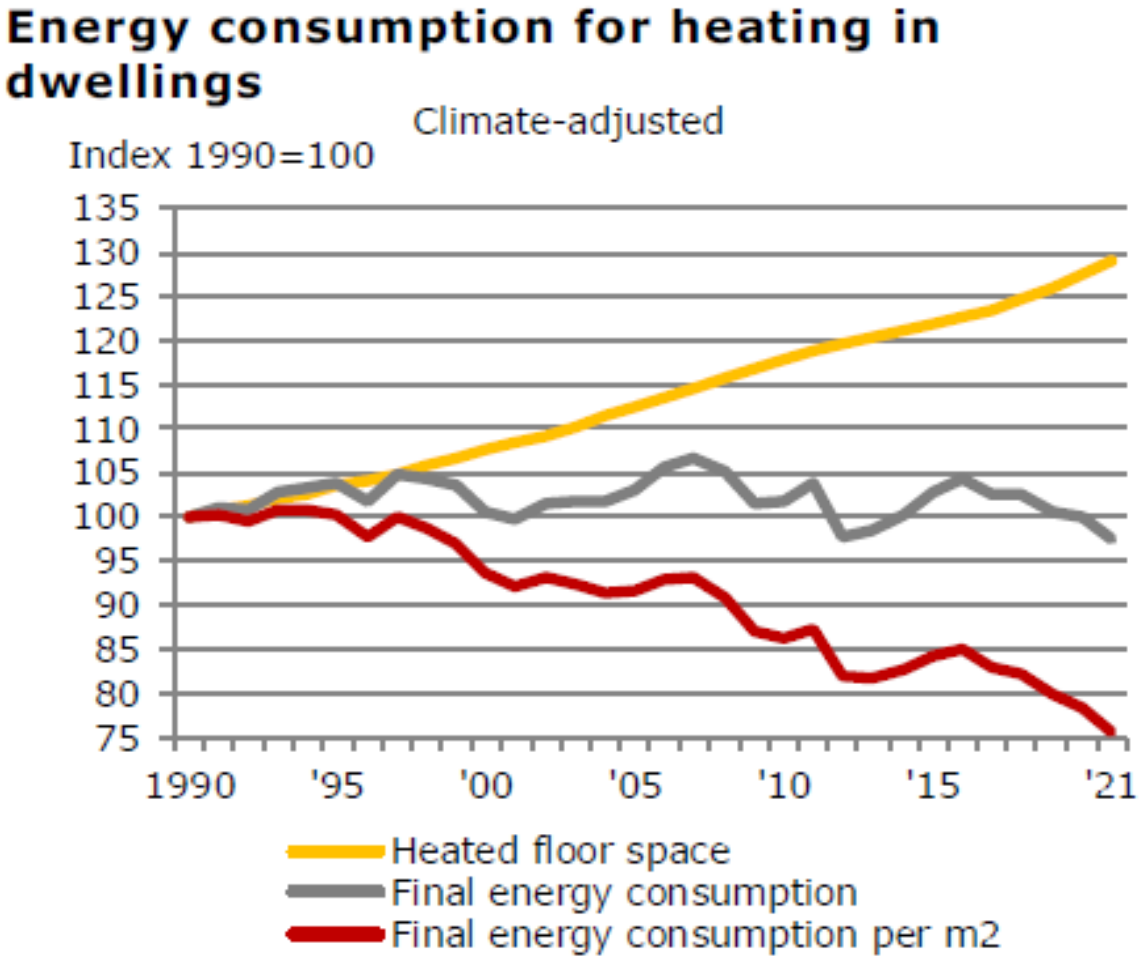


Both black economy and sustainability transitions have environmental and human costs:

Technology is no panacea

Saving is important!

Environmental justice conflicts: http://www.ejolt.org/



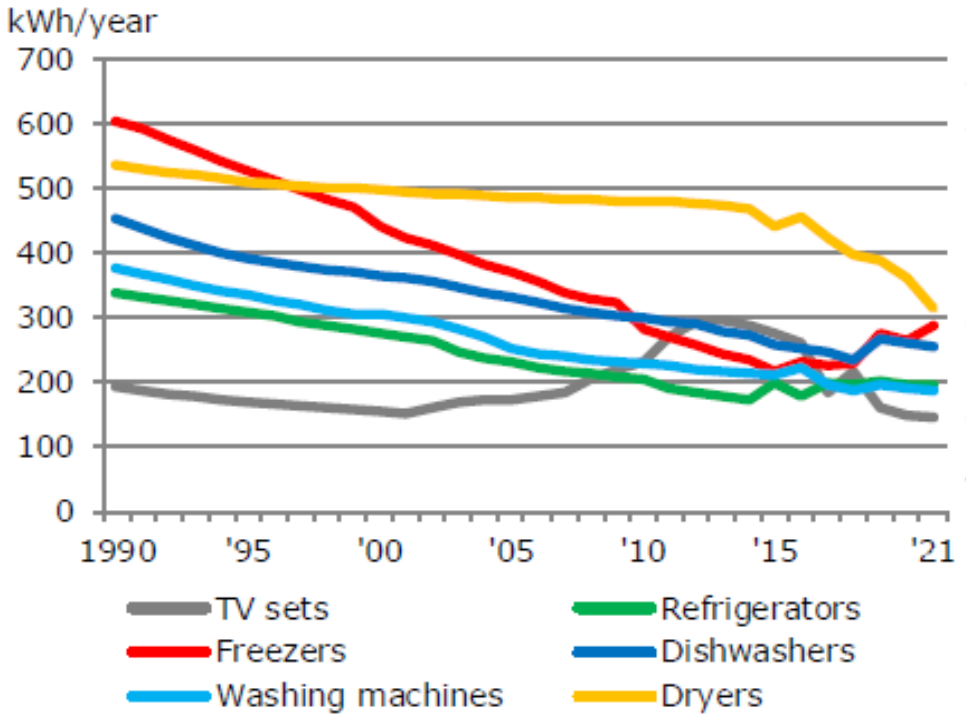
Danish Energy Agency: Energy Statistics 2021

Example from consumption

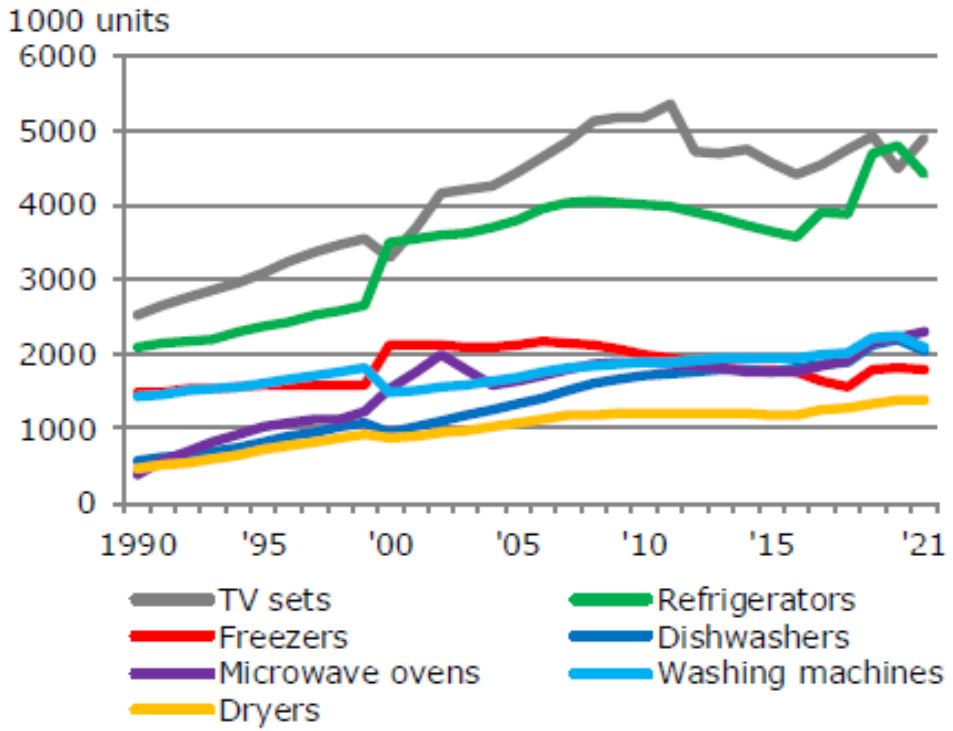
Fine with technological efficiency, but it is not enough

Counteracted by growth and rebound effects

Specific electricity consumption of household appliances



Household stock of electrical appliances



Danish Energy Agency: Energy Statistics 2021

Illustration fjernet

Then came larger screens, standby consumption, computers, mobile phones, gaming…

And now Artificial Intelligence

What made consumption growth possible after WWII?

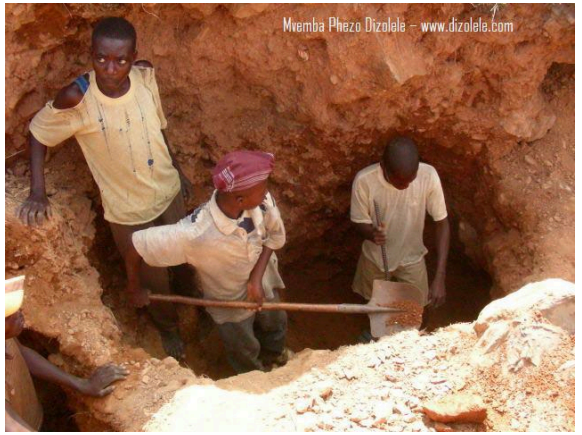
One condition was fossil energy: ”energy slaves” increased labour productivity

The other condition was cheap labour and resources from outside, based on neocolonialism

Wealth and poverty are two sides of the same coin – historically and now

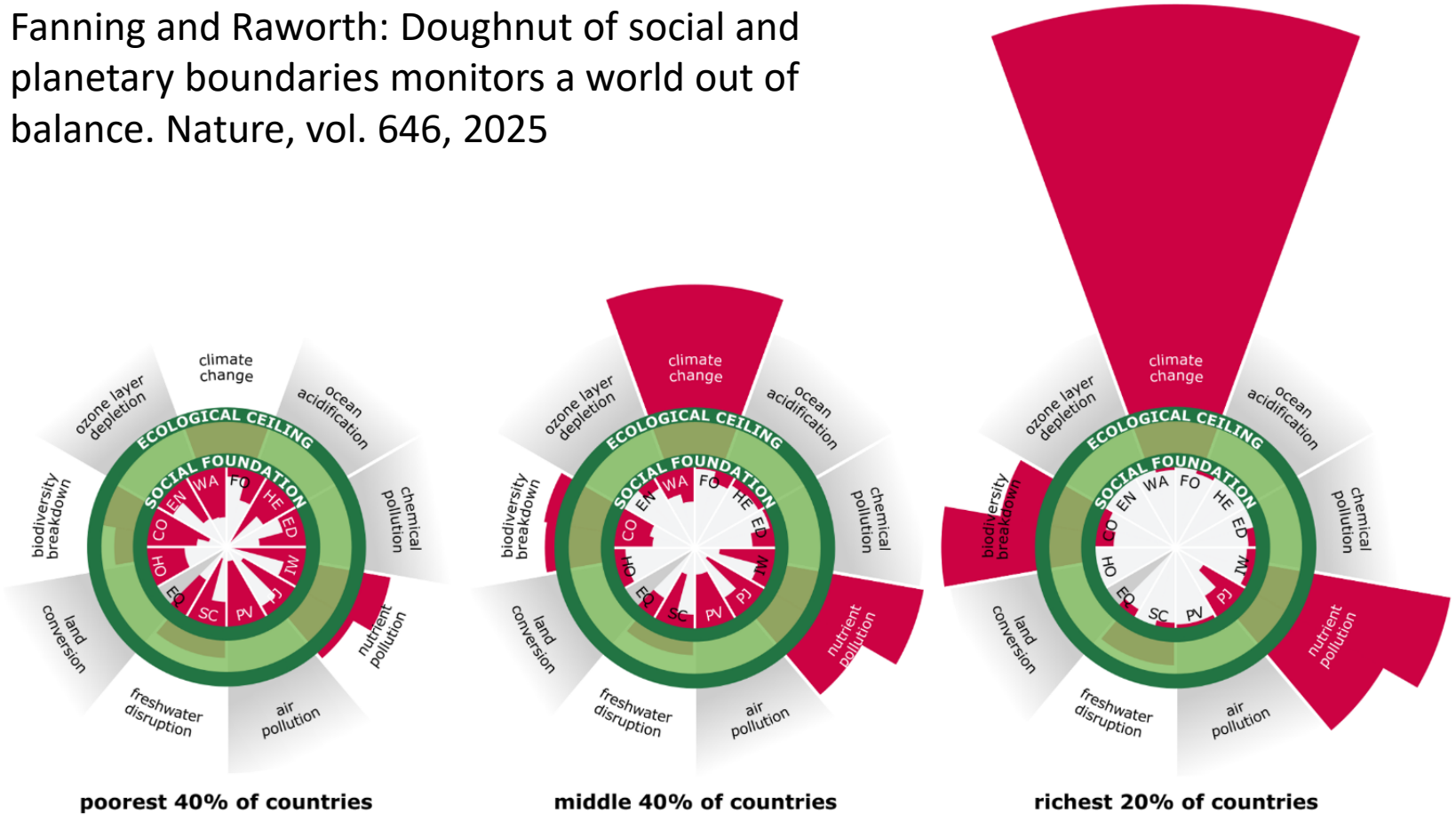
The basic understanding of inequality

Forming the price of a mobile phone





Fanning and Raworth: Doughnut of social and planetary boundaries monitors a world out of balance. Nature, vol. 646, 2025



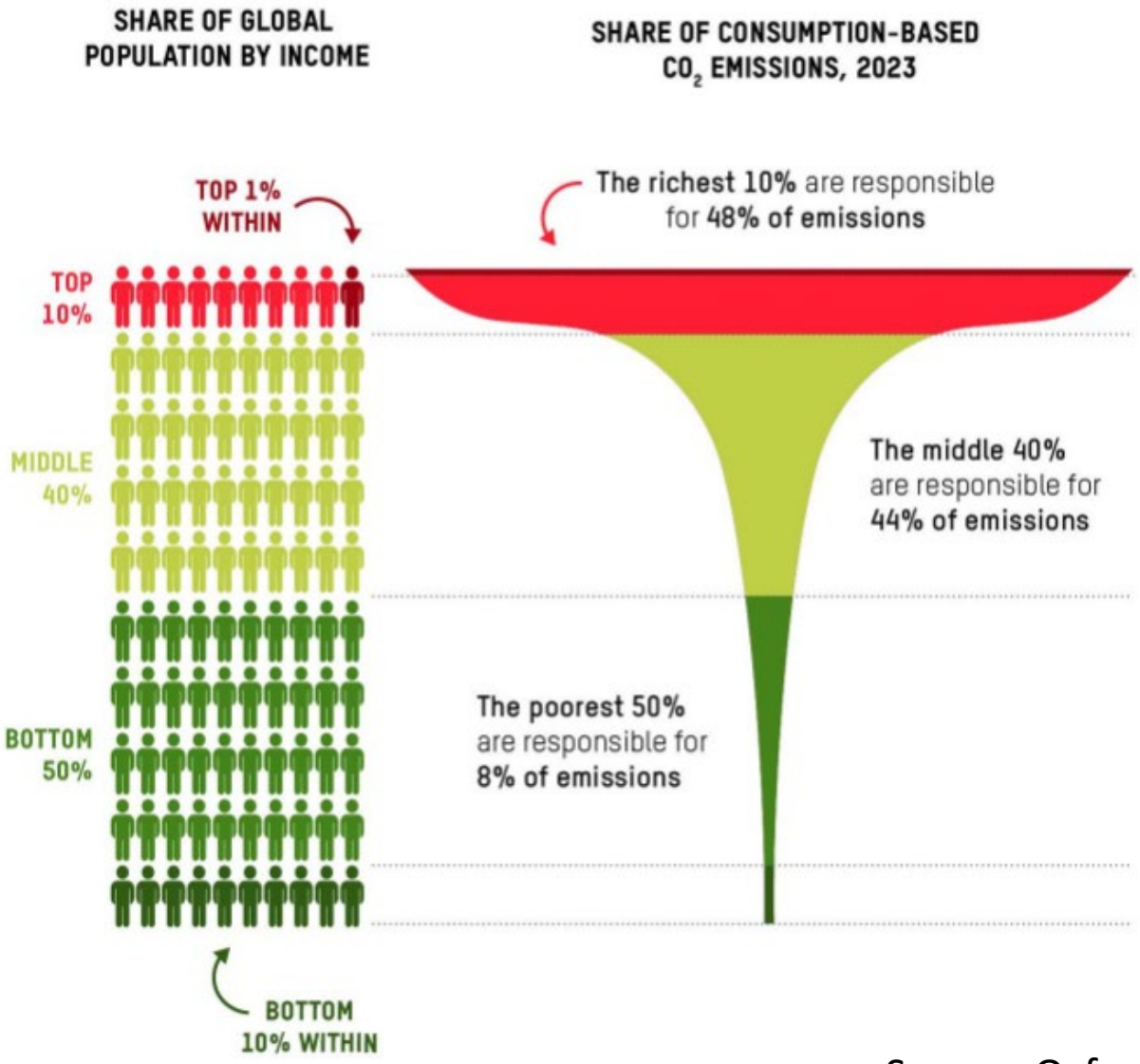
FO	food	WA	water	EQ	equality
HE	health	EN	energy	SC	social cohesion
ED	education	CO	connectivity	PV	political voice
IW	income & work	HO	housing	PJ	peace & justice

Understanding the challenge, part 2

Taking distribution into account

Stay within planetary boundaries

Fulfil basic needs for all



So:
material consumption of people with high incomes has to fall

Source: Oxfam

What does sustainable consumption look like, part 1?

Features of a low resource-intensity activity

- Time-consuming
- Requires few material devices
- Uses shared facilities
- Involves little transport
- Requires concentration on one thing at a time



More generally:

Labour-intensive consumption, public and private: care for children and elderly, health, repair, cleaning, education, culture…

What does sustainable consumption look like, part 2?



Public luxury and private modesty



Why to take from the rich:

- They have the largest footprint
- It is decisive for legitimacy and democracy

Private limitation and public luxury – policy examples

- Wealth tax, inheritance tax, progressive income taxes
- Excise taxes with basic allowances and high marginal rates – or introduce rationing
- Limit capital gains and other forms of unearned income related to ownership
- Restrictions on capital mobility across borders, tax cross-border capital flows, prohibit tax havens
- Public provisioning of basic services
- Green job guarantees, ease transformation
- **Transform the conditions of everyday life: make more sustainable lifestyles easier**





The main message

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Everybody can contribute, but the **responsibility** is first of all political

Can we do this **by design, not disaster**?