

# Flying in the face of the poor: Aviation and climate change



The UK government is now presenting itself as the world leader on climate change, but it is failing to take the action needed in a whole range of areas, of which flying is the most blatant. It is developing countries, who bear no responsibility for climate change, that will suffer most as a result.

Aviation makes up 10–15 per cent of the UK's contribution to climate change, and is our fastest growing source of emissions. Yet the Department of Transport is planning for a doubling of air travel between 2002 and 2020, and the resulting increase in greenhouse gas emissions will more than cancel out the reductions expected from all other sectors of the economy.

The government says UK carbon emissions are decreasing, but if aviation is included in the calculations our emissions are actually on the rise. In fact, the predicted growth in aviation will make it effectively impossible for the government to meet its target of cutting emissions by 60 per cent by 2050, let alone a more realistic 85 per cent cut which is needed to avert the worst dangers of climate change.

WDM is not calling for an end to flying. But we are saying the government must stop further growth in emissions from UK aviation, and this will be the key litmus test of its commitment to tackling climate change. Passing this test will require Ministers to introduce an effective environmental tax on aviation and stop airport expansion.

## Sky high emissions

The aviation industry says that flying only causes 2 per cent of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. It did in 1992, but has grown massively since. Worse still, because planes release a cocktail of pollutants at high altitude rather than ground level, the warming impact is 2 to 4 times greater than for CO<sub>2</sub> alone. As a result, aviation causes up to 9 per cent of human induced climate change globally each year. Because the UK's aviation industry is the second largest in the world, with one in five flights worldwide either landing or taking off here, it makes up 10–15 per cent of the UK's annual contribution to climate change.

Aviation is also our fastest growing source of greenhouse gas emissions. Under current government policies, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from aviation will more than double by 2030 and treble by 2050. But overall UK emissions need cutting by 85 to 90 per cent by 2050 if we are to do our bit to prevent dangerous climate change. To make these cuts, but allow aviation to keep increasing as planned, would mean flying accounting for 35 per cent of UK CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 2030 and 135 per cent by 2050. And this doesn't even take account of the extra warming that aviation produces beyond CO<sub>2</sub>

alone. So it will be impossible for the government to meet its targets to reduce greenhouse emissions without stopping the growth in flying.

Recent figures underline this point. In 2005, despite falls in some areas of the economy, UK carbon emissions actually rose overall when our share of international aviation is included in the figures – which the government refuses to do.

## Holidays in the sun

Airlines and their backers in government say that making flying more expensive is anti-poor, because it would prevent working class people holidaying abroad.

In fact, the poorest 60 per cent of the UK population take just 23 per cent of flights. The richest 18 per cent are responsible for 54 per cent of air travel. The growth in flying over recent years has been due to rich people flying more, whilst those on the lowest incomes are actually flying less.

The aviation industry receives an effective subsidy of £10.4 billion a year through not having to pay tax on fuel or VAT. So £5.6 billion pounds a year goes to the richest 18 per cent of the British population.

*Ryanair is "the irresponsible face of capitalism", British Airways are "only just about playing ball" in the fight to reduce carbon emissions, and the attitude of major American Airlines "is a disgrace".*

Ian Pearson, Environment Minister

*"Climate change is a serious risk to poverty reduction and threatens to undo decades of development efforts".*

Hilary Benn and the heads of 9 other donor agencies

*"Progress on introducing mechanisms to reduce the growth in aviation emissions is slow, and both the government and the industry are as intransigent as ever."*

Tim Yeo MP, Chair, Environmental Audit Committee

## There is no techno fix

Aviation fuel efficiency is improving at 1 per cent a year – nowhere near enough to stop the growth in greenhouse gas emissions from flying. Unfortunately there is no technological alternative to using oil on the horizon.

Offsetting emissions from flying is at best a distraction. At worst it actually increases emissions, for example where inappropriate tree planting disrupts ecosystems and soil structures, and can also lead to poor people being driven off their land. In any case, the carbon is released when the trees die, and with global warming itself predicted to cause deforestation in many

areas, planting trees is a very risky way to reduce carbon dioxide levels. Other forms of offsetting could make funds available in developing countries to reduce emissions.

However in reality the schemes are often money making scams, and just provide an excuse for rich country governments, companies and individuals not to reduce their own emissions. Funds have to be made available for low carbon development in poor countries – but they have to be made available in addition to, not instead of, emission cuts in rich countries.

## Jobs for the boys

The aviation industry employs 200,000 people in the UK. The effective subsidy of £10.4 billion means that each of these jobs is funded to the tune of £52,000 a year. A proper tax rate on aviation could generate more jobs than would be lost if aviation growth was curbed, whether through increased government spending or tax cuts. Simply halting the growth in aviation would cause no job losses.

## Poor farmers and tourism in developing countries

One argument made against stopping further growth in flying is that it will impact on poor people who produce goods like green beans and flowers, or rely on foreign tourism.

WDM is calling for the growth in aviation emissions to be halted, not the ending of all flights, so poor country tourism and airfreight could continue at current levels, or even rise if many short haul flights were taken by train or bus instead.

Increased taxes on UK flights would not affect farmers exporting goods to the UK, as initially the tax would only be on flights leaving the UK. In the longer-term, all fuel used in international transport should be taxed, but this could be introduced gradually, so it would not have a sudden impact. This would allow for diversification of poor country economies, which is desirable anyway.

In any case, the effects of climate change on poor countries around the world will be far greater than the impact of higher transportation costs on airfreight or tourism needed to prevent dangerous climate change.

The billions of people in the world's poorest countries who will never get on a plane are the ones who will pay the true cost of cheap flights, in the currency of climate change – through increased drought, floods, disease and famine. Increasing the cost of flying is pro-poor.

## Government inaction

The government's new climate bill does not include aviation emissions in the targets set. Meanwhile the recent small increase in air passenger duty, and the predicted effects of including flying in the EU's Emissions Trading Scheme will do little to reduce emissions. In fact it will mean UK aviation emissions will still increase by 84 per cent by 2020, down from a 92 per cent increase if nothing was done. This is nothing like enough.

## How do aircraft affect the climate?

Aircraft typically fly at altitudes of 8 to 13 km, where they release several climate changing gases and particles.

**Carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>)**, the most important greenhouse gas.

**Nitrogen oxides (NO<sub>x</sub>)** which under the influence of sunlight produce ozone, a powerful climate change gas.

**Water vapour** emitted at high altitude creates condensation trails, which can warm the earth's surface. These 'contrails' may develop into cirrus clouds which are also suspected of having a warming effect.

**Sulphate and soot particles** are less important, with the warming effect of soot being offset by sulphate particles which reflect radiation so have a small cooling effect.

## Take Action

To find out how you can help stop climate chaos, and win justice for the world's poor please visit [www.wdm.org.uk/climate](http://www.wdm.org.uk/climate) or call 020 7820 4900