

Inequality and the wellbeing of people and planet

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The central role of inequality

Arguably, the greatest threat to health and wellbeing is the climate emergency and the degradation of other environmental earth systems

Greater equality is essential to a world facing the consequences of overshoot and the climate crisis for

6 reasons



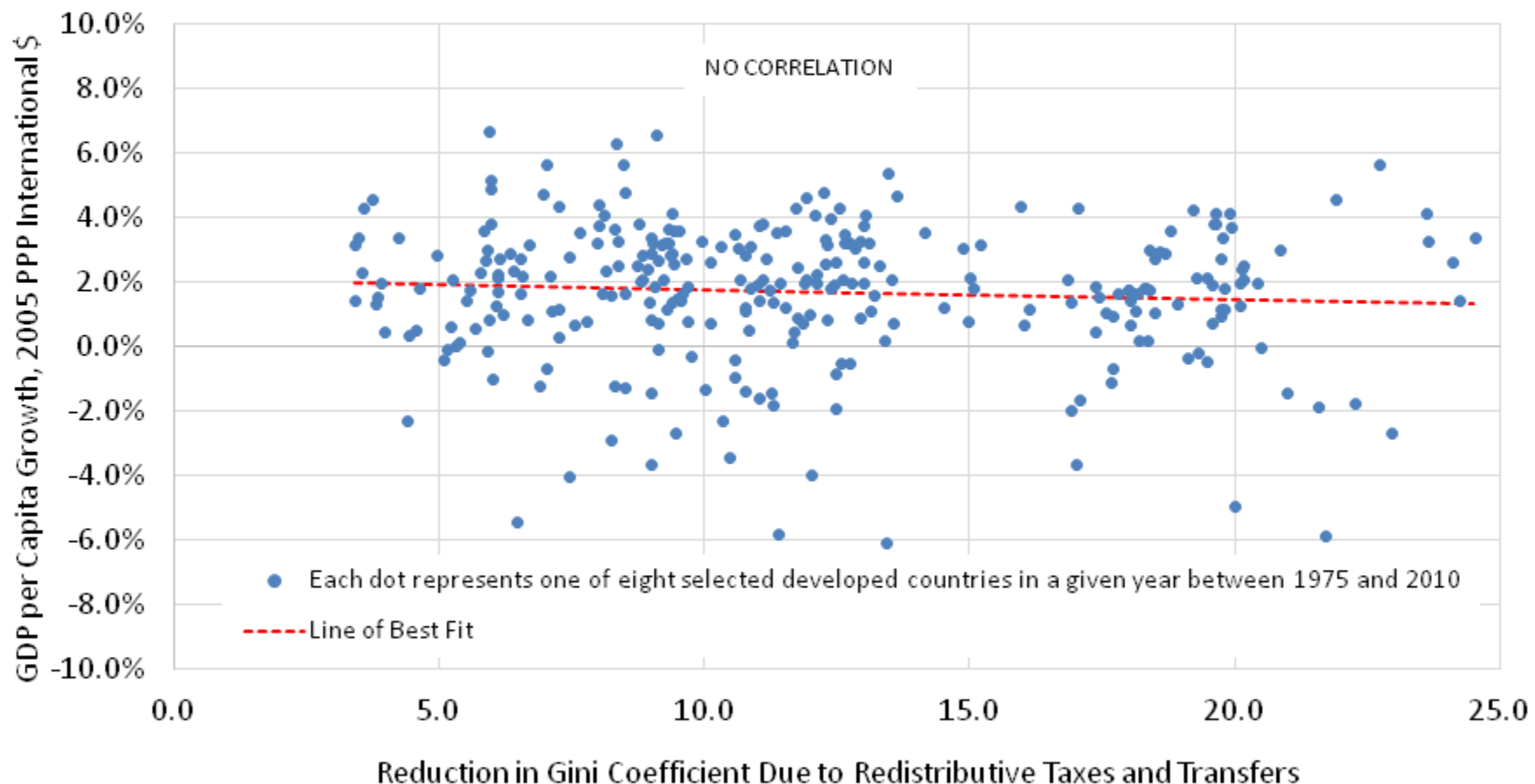
1. Because it is clear that there are planetary limits to economic growth, we can no longer behave as if economic growth was a substitute for a more equitable distribution of these resources among the global population of nearly 8 billion.

“Growth is a substitute for equality of income. So long as there is growth there is hope, and that makes large income differentials tolerable.”

- Henry Wallich, former governor of the US Federal Reserve Bank and professor of economics at Yale. 1972

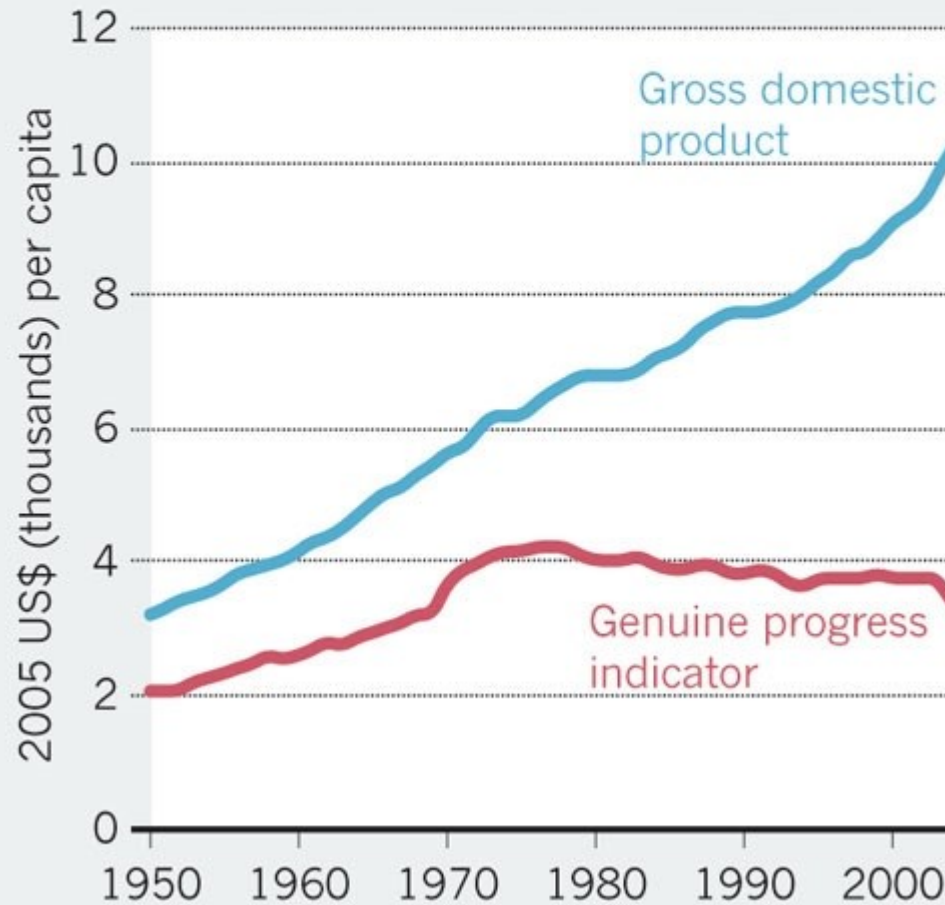
Chart 1: Developed countries show no correlation between income redistribution and growth

Redistribution vs. Economic Growth, Developed Countries, 1975 – 2010

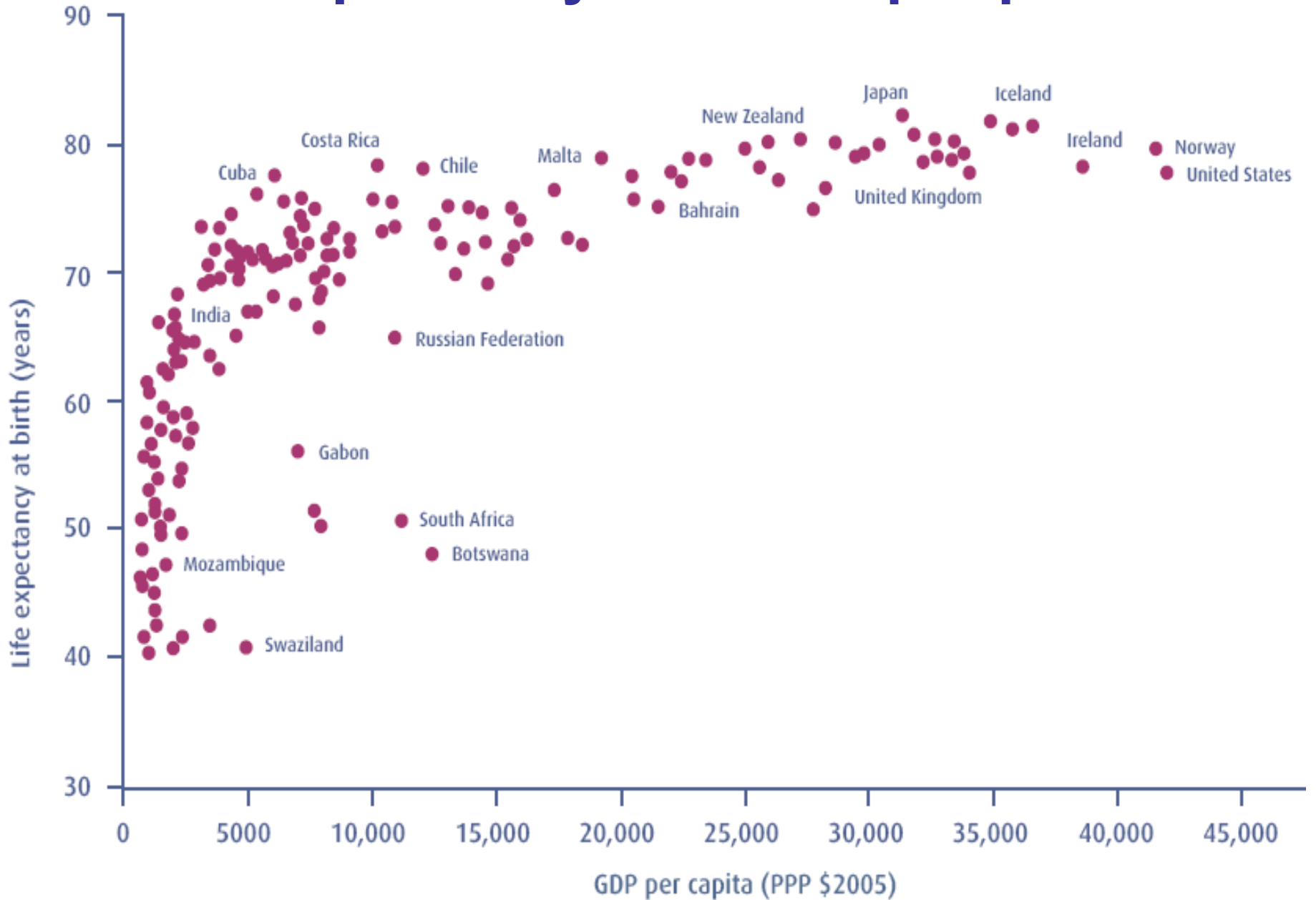


GENUINE PROGRESS FLATTENS

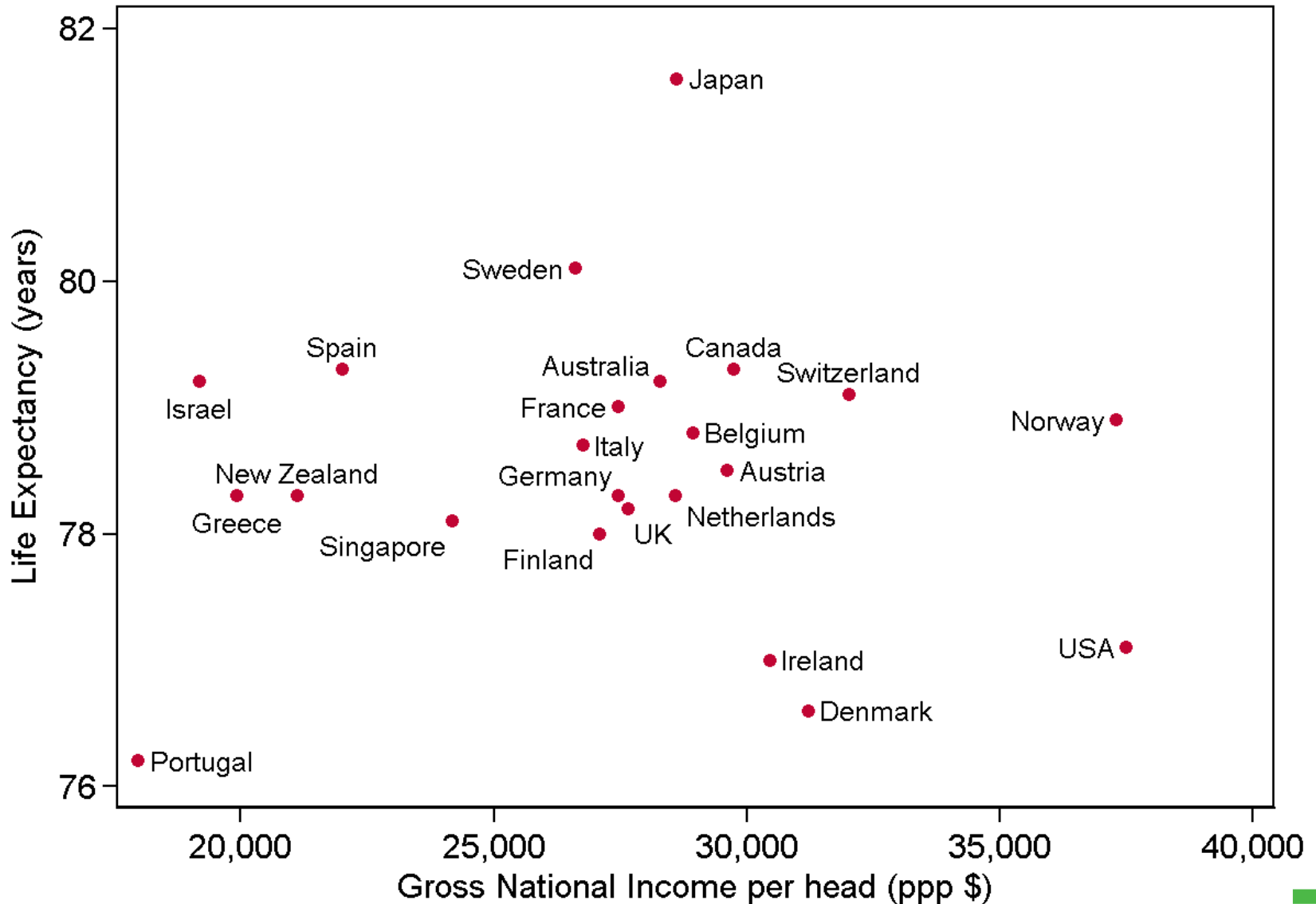
World GDP has soared since 1950, but a metric for life satisfaction called GPI has not.



Life expectancy and GDP per person



Life expectancy in rich countries is no longer related to National Income per head



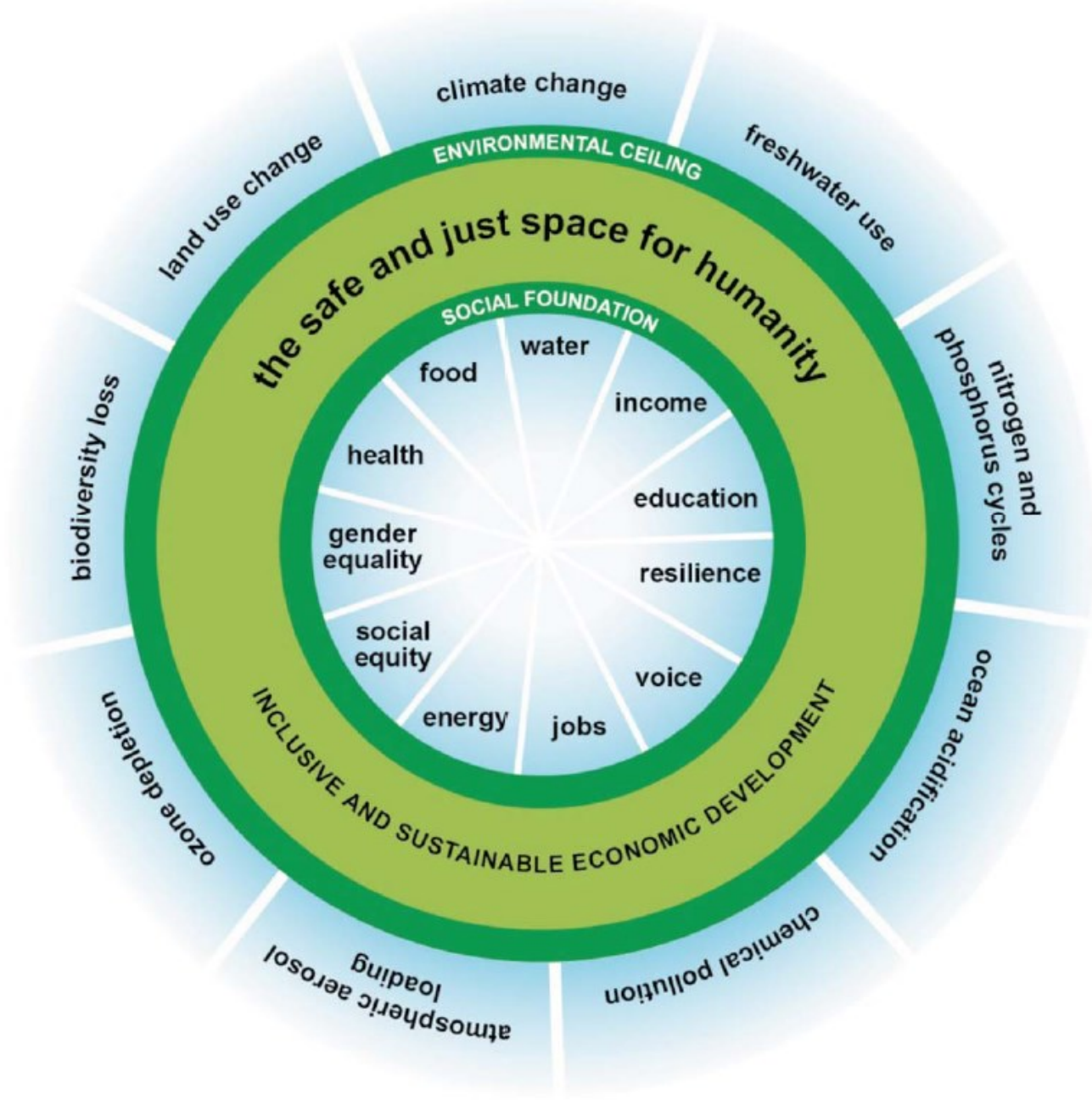


Figure 5. A safe and just space for humanity—the sustainable and desirable doughnut [34].



2. The move towards sustainability will meet with widespread opposition unless people feel that the inevitable burdens of change, and of the policies necessary to drive it forward, are fairly shared.

Gilets jaunes protests



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Equality underpins cooperation

the government recognised “the cooperation of the masses was ... essential [to the war effort], [and so] inequalities had to be reduced and the pyramid of social stratification ... [had to be] flattened” the government recognised “the cooperation of the masses was ... essential [to the war effort], [and so] inequalities had to be reduced and the pyramid of social stratification ... [had to be] flattened”

War and Social Policy, R Titmuss, 1958, p.86.



Richard Titmuss



3. The environmental footprint of the rich is so large that it has to be reduced not only for the sake of justice, but as an essential part of bringing the environmental crisis under control.

JUST

8

BILLIONAIRES OWN THE SAME
WEALTH AS THE POOREST
3.6 BILLION PEOPLE

(SO FEW THEY'D FIT IN THIS GOLF BUGGY)



DEMAND AN ECONOMY THAT WORKS
FOR EVERYONE, NOT JUST THE FEW

EVEN
IT UP



OXFAM



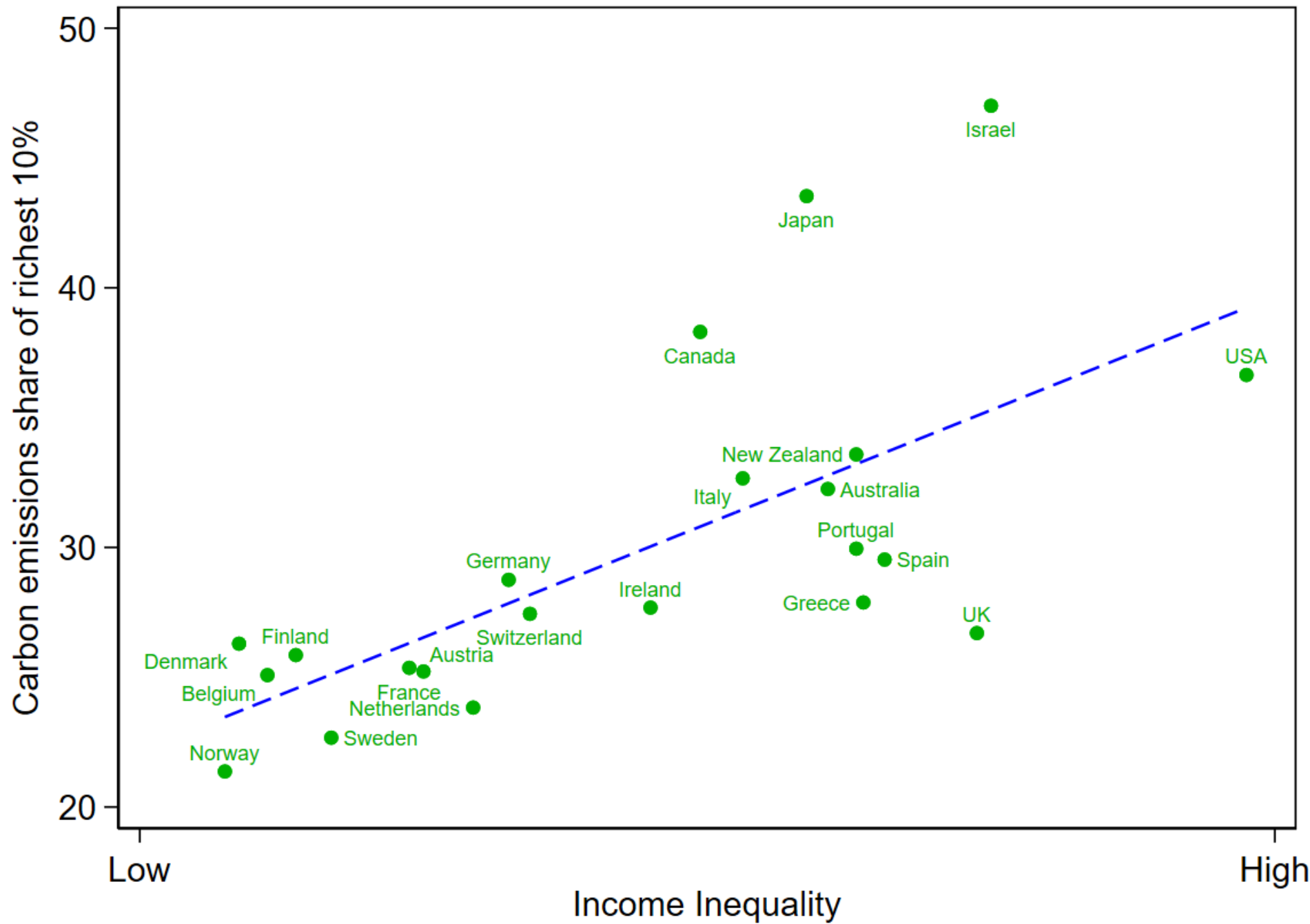
Enormous emissions gap between top 1% and poorest, study highlights

'Polluting elite' responsible for same amount of carbon dioxide in a year as poorest 10% are in more than two decades, data shows

It would take 26 years for a low earner to produce as much carbon dioxide as the richest do in a year, according to Autonomy's analysis of income and greenhouse gas data from 1998 to 2018.



Photograph: Getty Images





4. Consumerism is a major threat to sustainability, but it can be reduced by lowering the inequality that intensifies status competition and increases the desire for personal wealth.

Inequality & Consumption

“The evidence suggests that income inequality promotes increased status consumption as people at each income level try to emulate those above and that status anxiety is a potential driver in this relationship.”



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Review Article

Income inequality, status consumption and status anxiety: An exploratory review of implications for sustainability and directions for future research

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ABSTRACT

Income inequality has been associated with higher levels of status consumption with well-established harmful effects on health, wellbeing and economic stability. Research has suggested that status anxiety may be the mechanism that connects income inequality with status consumption, but the literature is disparate. In this interdisciplinary review, we draw together the evidence and explore the implications for climate change and sustainability, identifying that status anxiety may be a key driver of the higher levels of consumption in more unequal contexts. We find that status-anxiety fuelled consumption is associated with household debt, spatial inequalities, cycles of unsustainable consumption and longer commuting times, ultimately contributing to higher carbon emissions. We propose that further research should include more in-depth study and cohesive measurement of status anxiety and seek to better understand how to reduce unsustainable patterns of status-anxiety driven consumption. Reducing income inequality could have both short and long-term positive global environmental impacts.

1. Introduction

It is now well-established that income inequality is linked to multiple social, psychological, and economic indices of reduced well-being in societies, and there is a large and growing body of evidence suggesting that social rank and the associated psychological and physiological effects of status hierarchies are implicated in this relationship (Kasser, 2002; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). There is now substantial evidence that status consumption, defined as *‘the motivational process by which individuals strive to improve their social standing through the conspicuous consumption of consumer products that confer and symbolize status both for the individual and surrounding significant others’* (Glassman et al., 1999; p42) increases under conditions of greater income inequality. Emerging evidence suggests that status anxiety may be the mechanism that connects the two. Community life atrophies in more unequal societies, and status anxieties increase across all income groups (Layte & Whelan, 2014). As a result, we worry more about the impression we create in the minds of others, and consumerism thrives as we try to communicate our self-worth using status symbols.

People in more unequal societies therefore spend more on status goods (Walasek and Brown, 2015), work longer hours, and are more likely to get into debt (Frank, 2007). The impact of income inequality on

increased consumption not only has implications for wellbeing – but also for sustainability. Though far from universally accepted, the evidence for the consequences of high carbon emissions is scientifically incontrovertible. In May 2013, rising carbon concentrations in the atmosphere surpassed 400 ppm–40 per cent higher than before industrialisation, and higher than humans have ever breathed before. In 2007, it was estimated that if we are to keep the rise in global temperatures to no more than 2 °C, atmospheric concentrations of carbon will have to be reduced to 350 ppm (Hansen et al., 2013). Affluence is recognised as one of the strongest predictors of higher carbon footprints and greenhouse gas emissions through higher levels of travel, larger and multiple houses, alongside greater food waste and consumption more broadly (Clifton et al., 2011). Consumption – and especially conspicuous consumption – underpins higher ecological carbon emissions, disrupting the normal regeneration and reproduction of ecosystems (Lynch, 2019). In this context, the need to understand the underlying mechanisms behind patterns of consumption and to identify more sustainable future solutions has taken on a new urgency.

Despite the profoundly negative consequences of both income inequality and status consumption, the literature on the key drivers underpinning the relationship between the two remains disparate,

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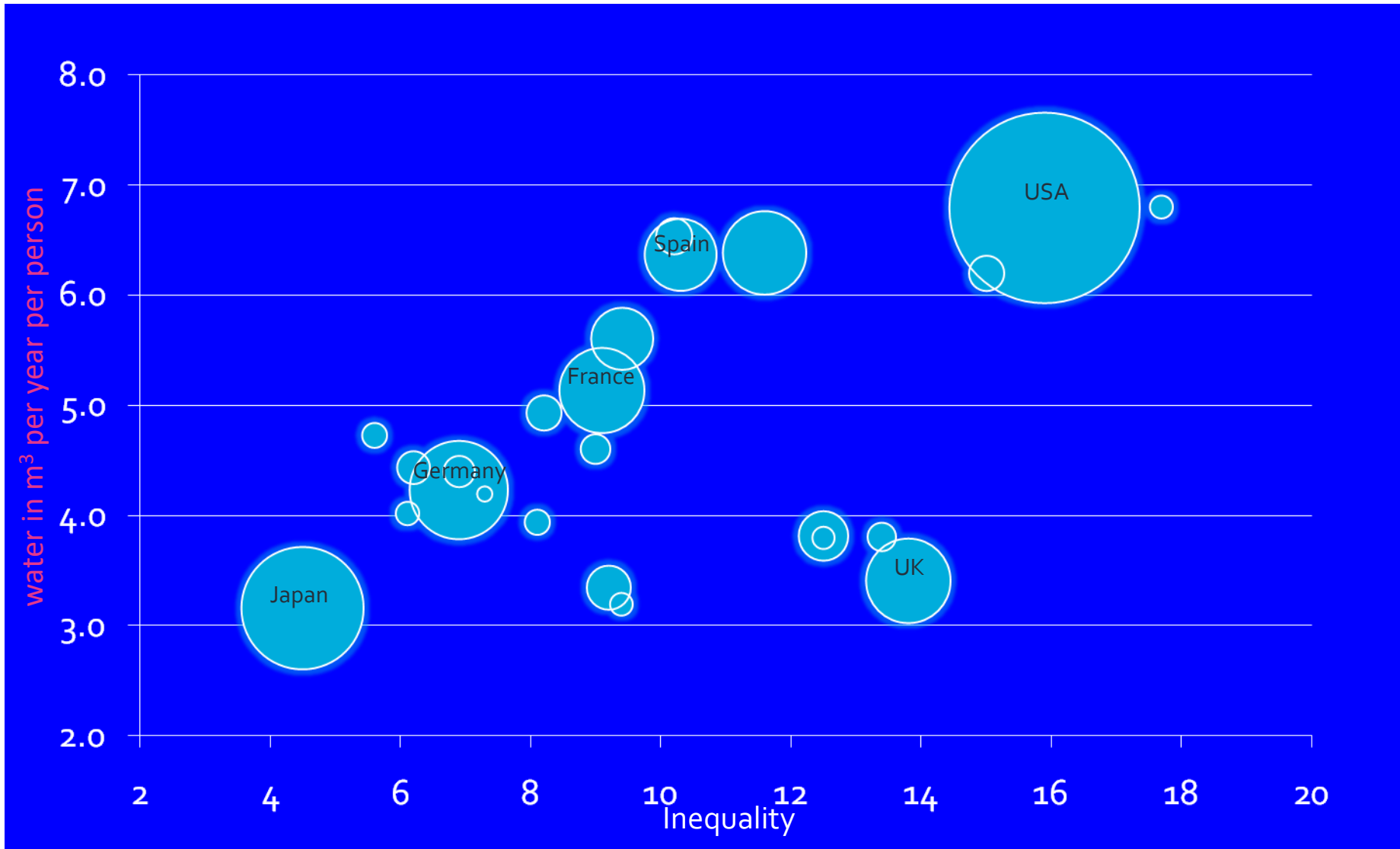
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Inequality and water





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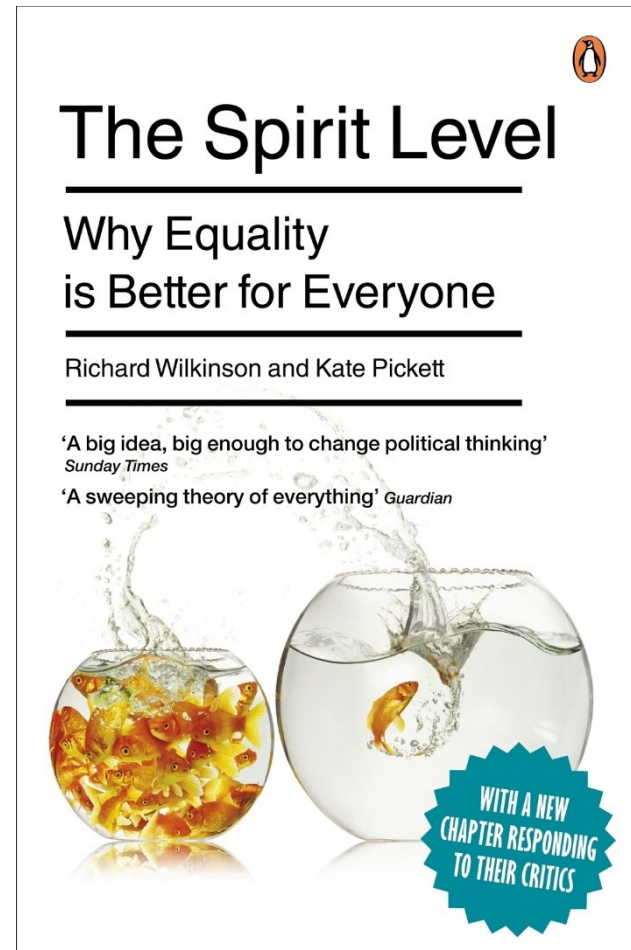
5. Greater equality is a central determinant of both health and social wellbeing. It is therefore crucial that government policy prioritises wellbeing over economic growth.

The Spirit Level showed

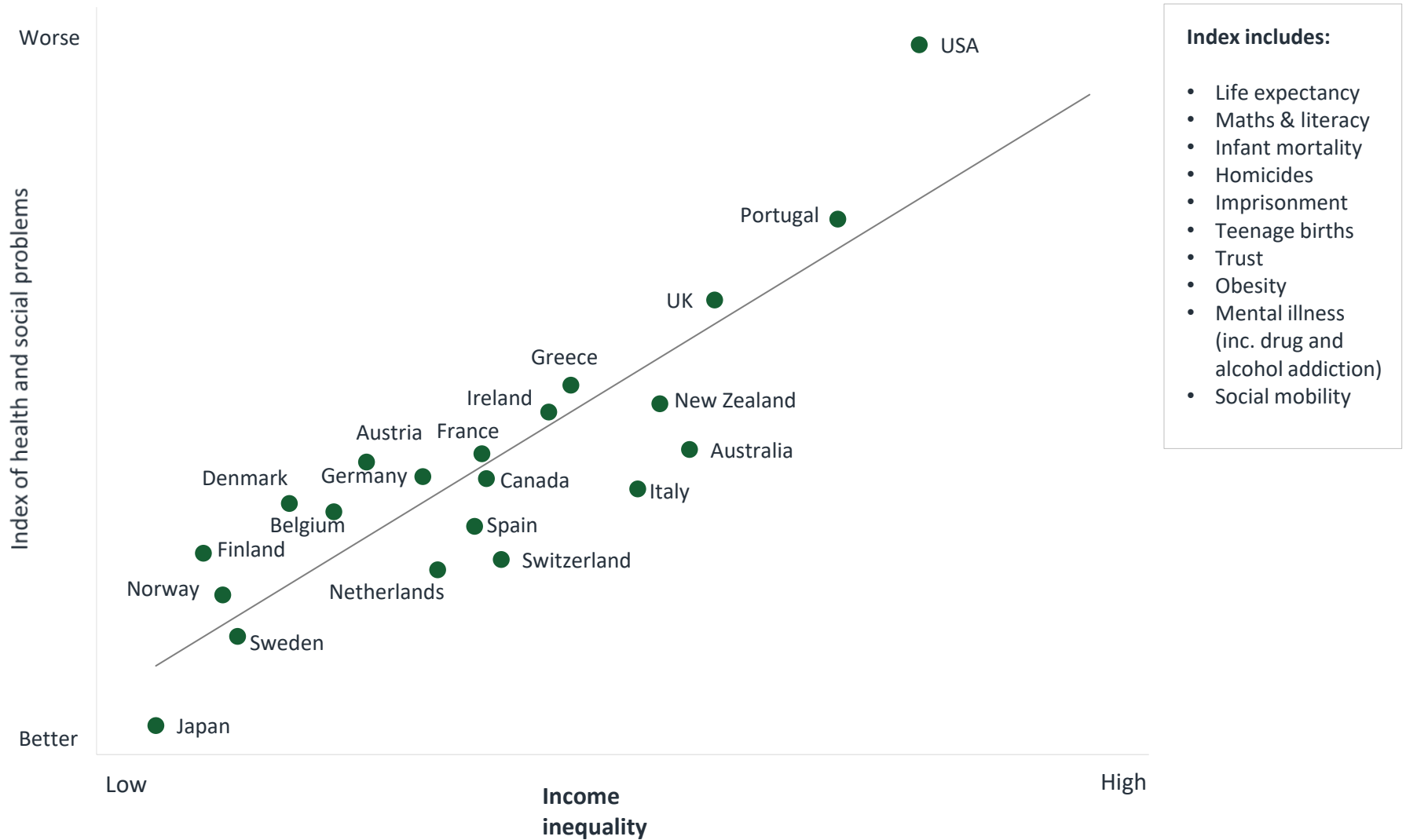
Income inequality is linked to a wide range of **health and social problems**

The effects are large and there are **big differences** between societies

Not only the poor are affected, inequality affects the **whole population**



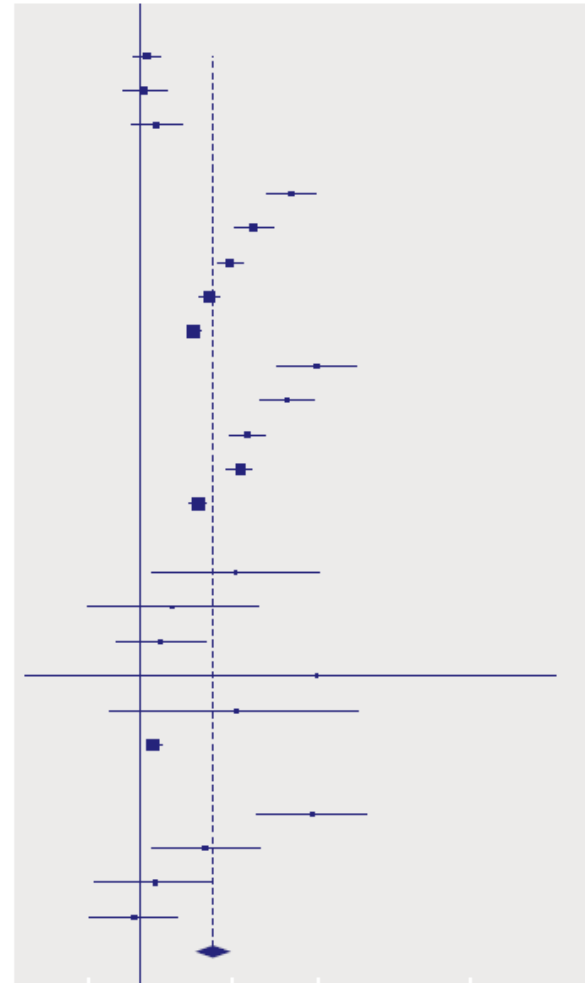
Health and social problems are worse in more unequal countries



Meta-analysis

Cohort study	Weight (%)	Relative risk (95% CI)
Denmark, CCHS/CPS 1976-8 ^{w1}		
Male	5.45	1.01 (0.99 to 1.02)
Female	5.17	1.01 (0.98 to 1.03)
Finland, Census 1990 ^{w2}	5.09	1.02 (0.99 to 1.04)
Norway, Census 1980-2002 ^{w3}		
Male age 30-39	5.06	1.17 (1.14 to 1.20)
Male age 40-49	5.28	1.13 (1.10 to 1.15)
Male age 50-59	5.45	1.10 (1.08 to 1.11)
Male age 60-69	5.55	1.07 (1.07 to 1.08)
Male age 70-79	5.58	1.06 (1.05 to 1.06)
Female age 30-39	4.46	1.20 (1.15 to 1.25)
Female age 40-49	5.00	1.16 (1.13 to 1.20)
Female age 50-59	5.30	1.12 (1.10 to 1.14)
Female age 60-69	5.48	1.11 (1.10 to 1.12)
Female age 70-79	5.56	1.06 (1.05 to 1.07)
New Zealand, Census 1991 ^{w4}		
Male	2.49	1.10 (1.01 to 1.20)
Female	2.46	1.04 (0.95 to 1.13)
Sweden, Census 1990 ^{w5}	4.13	1.02 (0.98 to 1.07)
Sweden, SLC 1980-6 ^{w6}	0.42	1.17 (0.89 to 1.53)
US, NHEFS 1971-5 ^{w7 w8}	1.50	1.10 (0.97 to 1.25)
US, NHIS 1987-94 ^{w9}	5.57	1.01 (1.01 to 1.02)
US, NLMS 1979-85 ^{w10}		
Male age 25-64	3.65	1.19 (1.13 to 1.26)
Female age 25-64	3.70	1.07 (1.01 to 1.13)
Male age ≥65	3.44	1.02 (0.96 to 1.08)
Female age ≥65	4.20	0.99 (0.95 to 1.04)
Combined	100.00	1.08 (1.06 to 1.10)

$I^2 = 96\%$ (95% CI 95% to 97%), heterogeneity $P=0.000$



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< Previous Article Next Article >



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The Ethical and Policy Implications of Research on Income Inequality and Child Well-Being

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 Tools 

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES:

Child well-being is important for lifelong health and well-being. Although there is a robust evidence base linking social determinants of health (eg, relative poverty and income inequality) to child well-being, social and public health policy tends to focus on interventions to mitigate their effects, rather than remove the root causes. The goal of this study was to examine associations between child well-being and income inequality.

METHODS:

We compared reported rates of childhood well-being in the 2007 and 2013 UNICEF reports on child well-being in wealthy countries. Twenty indicators of child well-being (excluding child poverty) were defined consistently in both the 2007 and 2013 reports. These variables were used to create an indicator of change in child well-being over the approximate decade 2000 to 2010. For our analyses of income inequality, we used the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Gini coefficient of income



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Review

Income inequality and health: A causal review

Kate E. Pickett  , Richard G. Wilkinson 

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Highlights

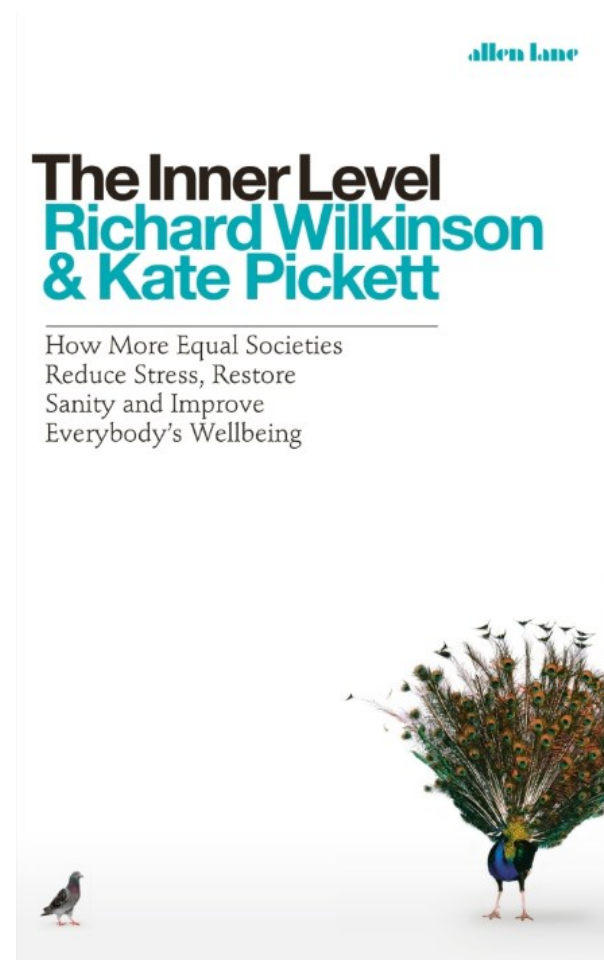
- Evidence that income inequality is associated with worse health is reviewed.
- It meets established epidemiological and other scientific criteria for causality.
- The causal processes may extend to violence and other problems with social gradients.

The Inner Level shows:

How income inequality undermines feelings of **self-worth** and damages **mental health**

How popular myths about **human nature** and **capabilities** are used to justify inequality

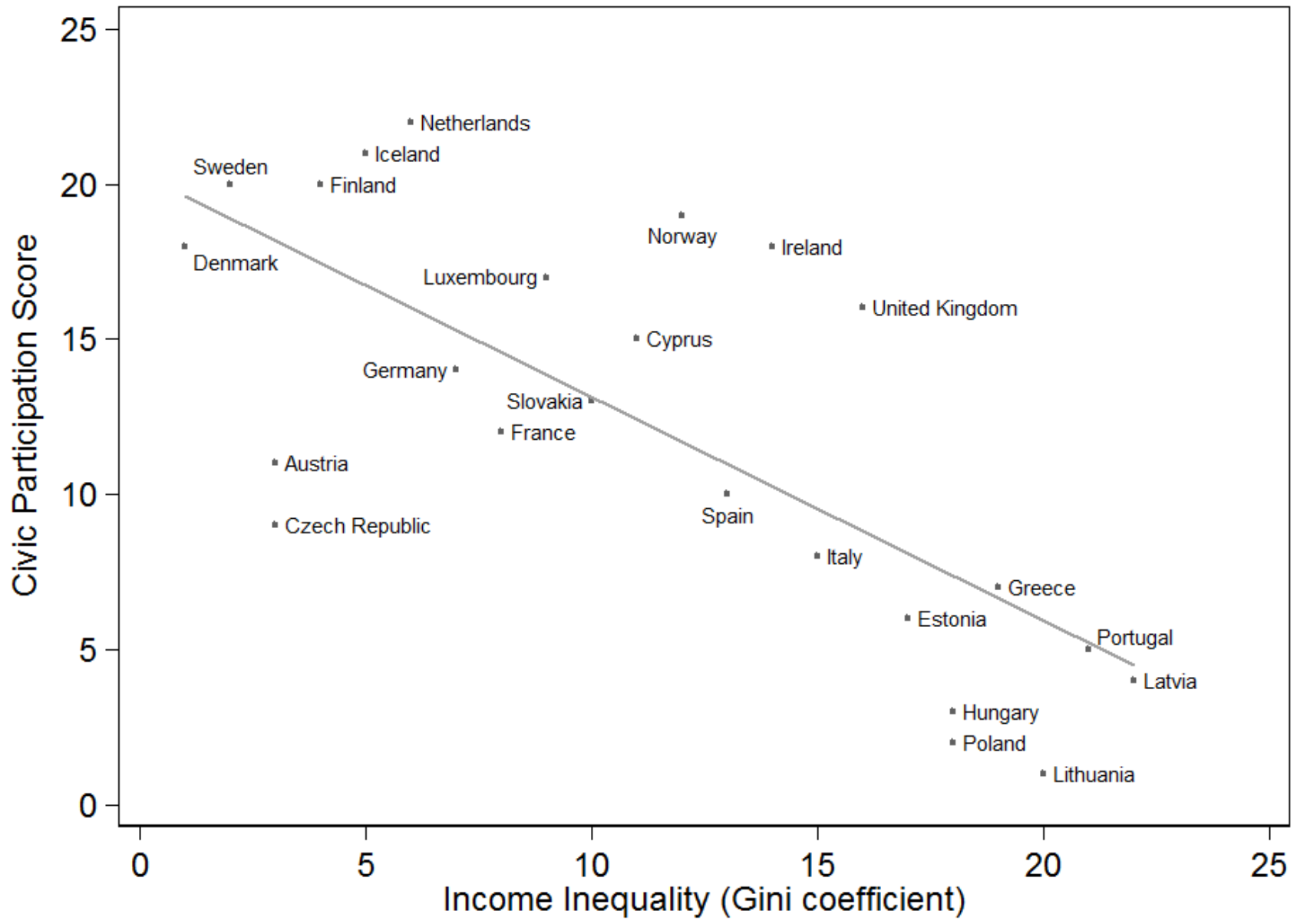
How we can tackle inequality and why we must do so to make the **transition to sustainable wellbeing**





6. Greater equality leads people to be more cooperative and mutually supportive. It will make us more willing to pull together and provide mutual support as we face environmental emergencies and disasters





More equal countries do better on recycling

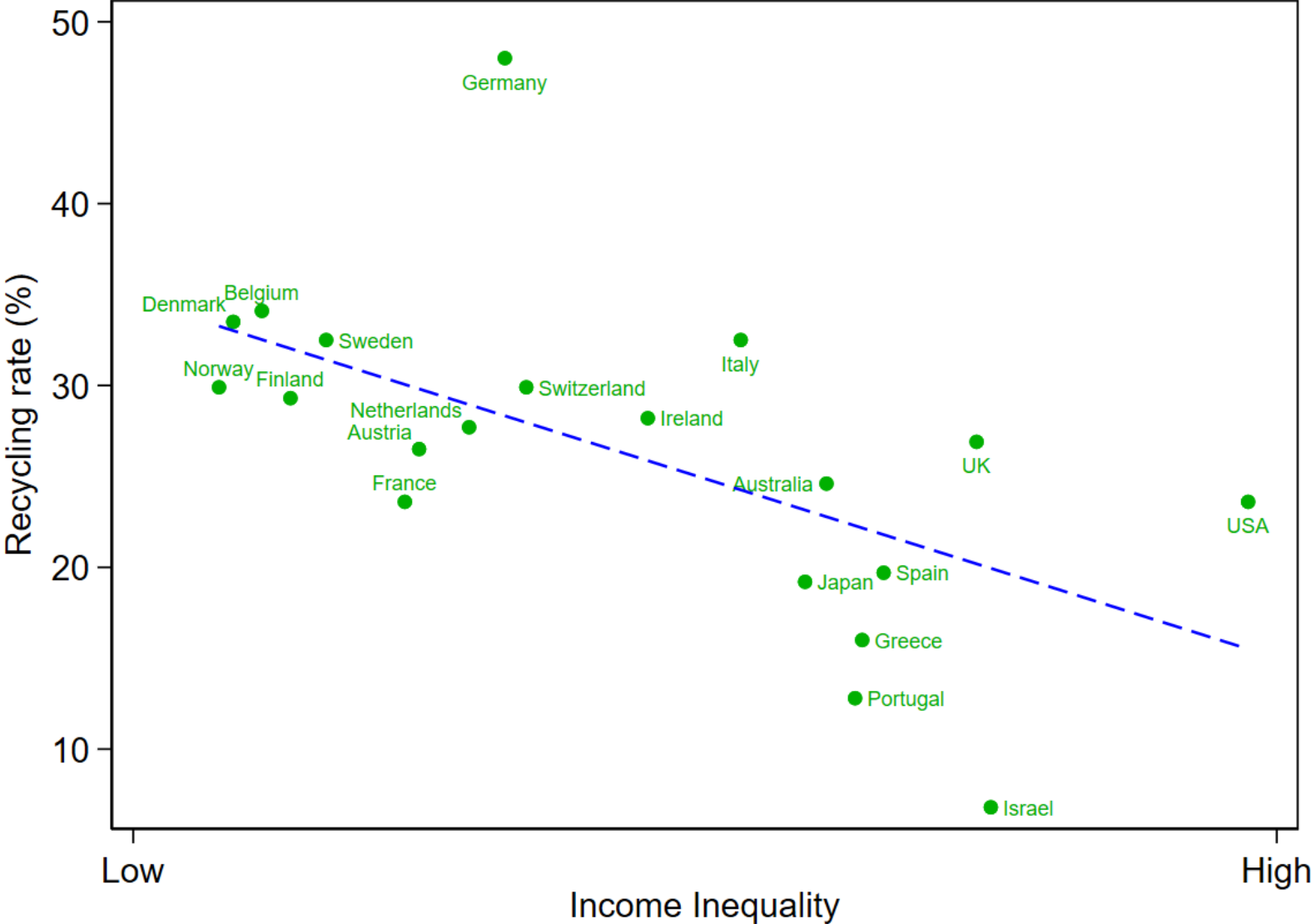
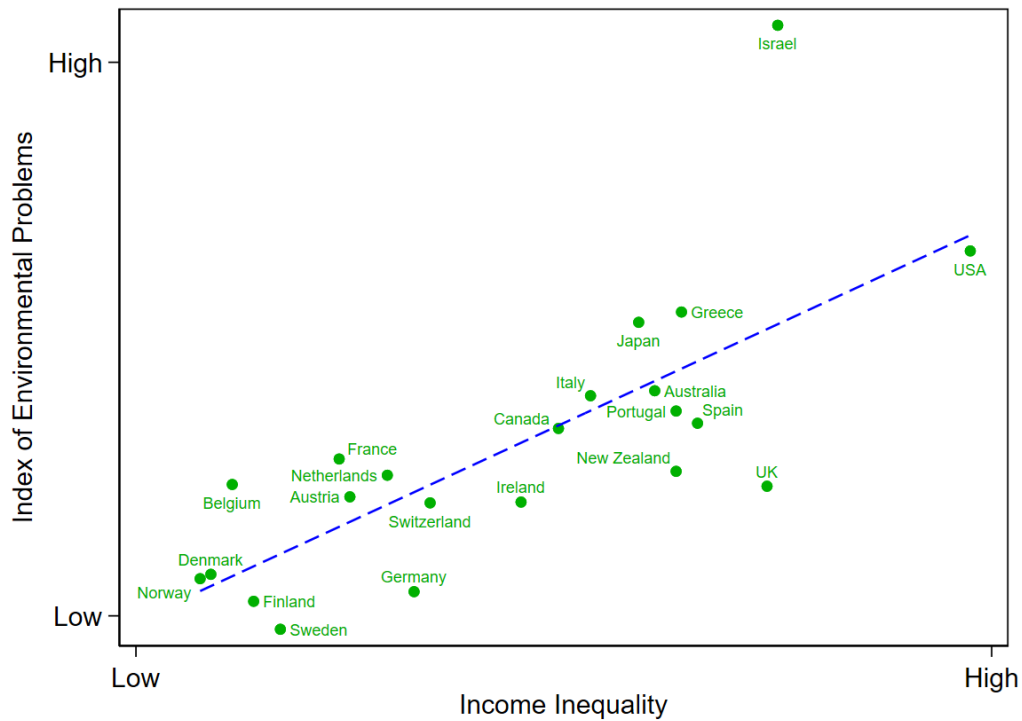




Fig 2 | Relation between environmental compliance score (importance business leaders give to their governments complying with international environmental agreements) and equality of income¹

Wilkinson R, Pickett K & De Vogli R. *BMJ* 2010; 341:1138-1140




EARTH4ALL: DEEP-DIVE PAPER 01 April 2022

From inequality to sustainability

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Inequality, The Spirit Level and more...

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- All Books
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- Videos & Podcasts
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- About Kate

[The Change We Need](#)

SPIRIT LEVEL LESSONS: A Six Point Plan For The Right (Left) Kind Of Active Government. We contributed this chapter to the new publication from the Tribune Group of Labour MPs

[UBI for mental wellbeing](#)



Richard G Wilkinson

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