

Book Review: Unsustainable Inequalities: Social Justice and the Environment by Lucas Chancel

In Unsustainable Inequalities: Social Justice and the Environment, Lucas Chancel demonstrates the role that economic inequality plays in maintaining social injustice and environmental unsustainability, exploring ways to better balance the reduction of socio-economic inequality and the strengthening of environmental protections. This is an accessible, relevant and thought-provoking analysis that uses well-presented facts and figures to unpack the intricate relationship between social injustice and environmental harm, finds Gayathri D. Naik.

If you are interested in this book, you can [listen](#) to or [watch](#) author Lucas Chancel in conversation with LSE's Dr Alina Averchenkova, recorded at an [October 2020 online event hosted by LSE's International Inequalities Institute](#).

Unsustainable Inequalities: Social Justice and the Environment. Lucas Chancel. Harvard University Press. 2020.

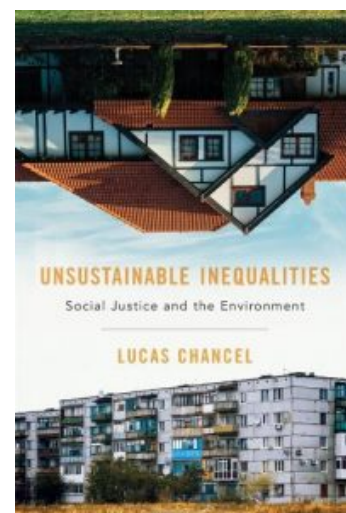
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'Inequality', 'social justice' and 'the environment' are embedded in our discussions of climate change. These three terms are always interlinked, each reverberating with the others, and this interlinkage forms the premise of the new book by Lucas Chancel, [Unsustainable Inequalities](#). Offering an economist's perspective, this book will surpass the expectations of all non-economics readers through its accessible analysis and inclusion of a detailed examination of social injustice and environmental unsustainability.

Chancel argues that social injustice and environmental unsustainability are connected by one common element – economic inequality. Economic inequality remains the root cause of all other inequalities across the globe. From societal interactions to international diplomacy, the possession or lack of income and wealth brings either attention or discrimination. The terminology 'developed and developing' itself points to economic inequalities between nations. While developed countries try to sustain their income, developing countries focus on economic development to combat poverty and inequality. Often choices of development have resulted in unsustainable environmental policies.

Spanning seven chapters, the book demarcates Chancel's arguments in three parts. Part One discusses the sources of unsustainable development; Part Two deals with the interactions of environmental and social inequities; and Part Three outlines the implications of political, social and economic policy for reducing inequality and raising environmental protections. The trajectory of the book's analysis is essentially twofold. Firstly, it unfolds the basic cause of all inequalities as economic inequality, which is the result of less prudent public policy choices: a fact that is now attracting more attention from international agencies than ever before. Secondly, Chancel examines the link between this inequality and environmental inequities. The book focuses attention on the principles of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) where equality meets sustainability. The SDGs are a United Nations-led collaborative approach uniting all countries in ensuring economic development, socially equitable public policy and actions against climate change.

Throughout *Unsustainable Inequalities*, Chancel discusses the need and ways to balance the reduction of socio-economic inequality against environmental protection. Unless economic inequalities are addressed, the SDGs would remain incomplete. Chancel highlights the fact that environmental harm is caused by, and itself a cause of, social inequalities among present generations as well as between generations. Thus, both inter-generational and intra-generational equity are threatened.



The book underscores Chancel's argument that while reducing economic inequality leads to improvements in the environment and ecosystems, this is not an automatic guarantee. But why can't inequality be addressed? What are its causes that have such a devastating impact on social equality and the ecosystem? Chancel presents his findings here. Inequalities vary among nations and they have increased within nations in the twentieth century. According to him, the decrease in public wealth and the exponential increase in private wealth are key factors in the widening of wealth inequality, leading to the confinement of wealth with a few, while others live in poverty or below poverty lines without any welfare measures from the state. Additionally, technological innovation, trade and financial globalisation as well as the adoption of neoliberal trade policies have contributed to the slow death of the social state.

Sharing the benefits and burdens in natural resources has always been inequitable – be it in access to natural resources, exposure to hazards, burden-sharing in responsibility and unequal participation in policymaking as well as inequalities in enjoying the benefits of environmental policies. A parallel could be drawn here to the unequal distribution of wealth among a small number of individuals who are also highly influential in politics. The super-rich influence not only tax policies, but also policies on natural resources. A contradiction arises here as countries argue for cleaner energies to address climate change, but vehemently support the rich and powerful in the perpetuation of environmental harm.

Chancel stresses the role of natural resources energy in inequality to substantiate this point. Energy is crucial in the economic and social development of a nation, improving its economy, strengthening its health, employment facilities and improving socialisation. Access to and use of energy are unequal across the globe with developed countries like the United States leading the world's energy consumption; in many developing countries, electricity is a dream for millions. This is true in the case of other resources like clean drinking water, healthy food and territorial resources.

Income inequality also causes unequal exposure to risk. Poor people are vulnerable to both natural hazards and human-caused environmental accidents, risking their health, life and property. Chancel highlights this through the example of discrepancies in the health impacts caused by air pollution in cities like New Delhi. These cities are not only the victims of hazards but also of unequal and untargeted policies. A vicious cycle formed by economic, environmental and political inequalities is thus highlighted by Chancel.

The book argues for the need to reduce economic inequality without compromising environmental needs. For this, substantial amounts of public investment are required in energy, water, health and transport. This needs to be supplemented by efforts to change social choices regarding energy and transport. Chancel suggests that progressive ecological taxation can be introduced where every polluter is held responsible for paying based on the legal principle of 'the polluter pays'. The benefits of such taxation should be spent to ensure inclusiveness among the poor to enable them to switch to greener choices. For all these efforts, a coherent and collaborative approach in policymaking is required, with the participation of all stakeholders at local, regional, national and international levels.

Many point out that the poor are simultaneously significant polluters at the local ([although not the global](#)) level due to their inability to switch to unaffordable greener choices and the victims of that same pollution. Chancel shows this to be true. But why? *Unsustainable Inequalities* provides an answer – economic inequality. Through a simple and well-organised presentation of facts and figures, this book has unpacked the intricate relationship between social injustice and environmental harm and argues for delinking the complex nexus they form with economic inequality. This book is a highly relevant and thought-provoking read during the COVID-19 pandemic when millions are affected socially and economically by lockdowns and restrictions. Our changed circumstances have nonetheless raised hopes for a better, eco-friendly future if we have the determination to regulate our consumption and emissions.

Note: This article first appeared at our sister site, [LSE Review of Books](#). It gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Markus Spiske](#) on [Unsplash](#)
