Who Is More Responsible for the Environment: Corporations or Individuals?

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Introduction

The United Nations report on climate change released in October 2018 shows that humankind has less than two decades and "…plenty of hard work ahead to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius and avoid catastrophic consequences to the planet" (Gaby Del Valle, 2018). This, according to Vox, an authoritative news outlet.

The environmental crisis that people collectively face today is not a recent problem. Since the Agricultural Revolution, people have been proactively transforming the surrounding environment, thus affecting climate. This trend was further accelerating with the advent of the Industrial Revolution (History.com Editors, 2017). From that point onward, individual humans were also not the only ones contributing to the environmental crisis. Corporations emerged in new industries and began to act in their own interests, i.e., for profit. Certain corporations operated in the industrial sector, and those that thrived became major polluters and remain so to this day. Today, it is hotly debated whether corporations are more responsible than the per capita individual polluter. By providing two general arguments and completing two brief case studies of the energy and transport industries, both extremely detrimental sectors to the climate, this essay will argue that corporations are more responsible than private individuals for the environmental crisis.

Why Should Corporations Be More Responsible?

Corporations should take the burden because they have a much larger carbon footprint than private persons. According to a 2017 "Carbon Majors" report by the Climate Accountability Institute, 70% of the total greenhouse gas emission can be traced back to 100 specific companies (Climate Justice Programme, 2013). This means that only about 30% of total emissions are attributed to individual behavior. Since greenhouse gases are one of the primary sources of environmental degradation, this data demonstratively shows the global impact corporations have on climate change, as well as other environmental issues. Moreover, corporations are also responsible for various secondary ecological issues. For example, a study shows that the emission of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, from the world's wetlands could likely increase by 50 to 80 percent by 2100 due to the secondary effects of global warming (The IPCC, 2022). Through a brief examination of this data, it is easy to trace this back to the companies that produce such harmful substances. Private persons have a negligible comparative impact in these areas of concern.

Moreover, unlike individuals, corporations have grown powerful enough to influence government decision-making when it comes to the environment. Unfortunately, some companies have utilized their vast networks and resources to "misrepresent and misuse science at the public's expense," in the words of the Union of Concerned Scientists (The Union of Concerned Scientists, 2012). The Union of Concerned Scientists added that "cases of such corporate intrusions have been observed in a variety of places where science is used to inform federal

policy" (The Union of Concerned Scientists, 2012). For instance, companies' interference caused the blocking of a proposal by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ("EPA") to introduce a national ground-level ozone standard. A study done by the same organization also reveals that certain large corporations from the S&P 500 contributed to the campaigns for Proposition 23, a 2010 initiative in California that would have removed the state's "global warming mitigation law" (The Union of Concerned Scientists, 2012). This evidence points towards corporations being more proactively accountable for many government decisions that have direct or indirect environmental impacts, when compared to the average citizen. They have significantly greater power than individuals, even collectively, so they are naturally more responsible for using their influence to contribute to the solving of the environmental crisis.

Case in Point: The Energy Sector…

Following the logic of the two arguments made above, it is necessary to briefly examine the energy and transport industries, two of the most environmentally unfriendly sectors in the modern world. These two case studies will further illustrate that corporations are more at fault for creating and thus responsible for solving the environmental crisis than individuals.

Looking at the energy industry first, mainly consisting of fossil fuel extraction, processing, and consumption, people can rely on data to paint the picture. According to the EPA, energy production and use "contributes to climate change, accounting for more than 84 [percent] of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions" (The U.S. EPA, 2015). Corporations, such as ExxonMobil, are behind this massive level of emissions. Historic data from 1978 to 2011 reveals that an overwhelming majority of 78 percent of total greenhouse gas emissions in the energy industry can be attributed to the actions of energy companies (The United Nations, 2018). This number indicates that firms are more accountable for worsening the environmental crisis than regular citizens.

Energy corporations bear a burden for tackling the environmental crisis they are largely to blame for. Richard Heede is the leader of the "Carbon Majors" project hosted by the Climate Accountability Institute. In an interview with Vox, he voiced his opinion that fossil fuel companies on the supply side of the relationship must ensure their products are environmentally as harmless as possible (Gaby Del Valle, 2018). He argued that mitigating the negative impacts of the carbon economy and transforming it hinges on the efforts of corporations.

This argument is not overly controversial. The energy industry thrives on the use of polluting fuels and owes its fortune to obvious pollutants. As such, having these big players shoulder the financial weight of the remedies is only fair. And if such companies do not partake in the efforts to make a positive change, then such change would not be realizable in the first place. As the primary source of carbon emissions, corporations have to take the lead in tackling the problem.

…And the Transportation Sector

The same rhetoric can be applied to companies and individual consumers in the transport industry. The International Energy Agency estimated that for 2019, the transport industry, including daily transportation and the manufacturing of transport vehicles or technology,

released 8.5 gigatons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere (Transport – Topics - IEA, 2020). One can readily blame corporations for these emissions. In 2019, approximately 8.25 gigatons of greenhouse gases could be directly or indirectly traced back to the activity of these companies (Transport – Topics - IEA, 2020). This number shows, once again, that relevant companies are more responsible for environmental harm in this sector too.

There are additional claims that firms involved in transportation-related businesses should be more active than individuals in leading innovation to make cleaner transportation technology more accessible. For example, Elon Musk is one famous trailblazer who advocates for entrepreneurs to act more responsibly to proactively solve the environmental crisis by innovating transportation technology. He, too, believes the power of corporations to cope with environmental issues overshadows that of individuals. In an interview with the leader of TEDx, Musk explained how he and his companies, including Tesla, SolarCity, and SpaceX, are taking responsibility for the environmental crisis by working on the technology of ultracapacitors and trying to make electric vehicles more ubiquitous (TED, 2022). Such actions send a message that corporations should work to solve environmental problems.

Conclusion

Overall, by arguing that firms have a greater environmental footprint than individuals and that those same companies have more power to effect a change, both commercially and legislatively, and through an examination of the energy and transport industries, this essay argues that corporations hold the lion's share of the responsibility for tackling the environmental crisis.

Although reports made by institutions, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change or the committees at the U.N. Climate Change Conferences, send worrying signals, good signs are still apparent. As two essays written by the authoritative magazine *The Economist* pointed out, many companies are already taking responsibility, and some are even going further and moving quicker than governments. For example, in 2018, almost 1,400 firms globally, with combined revenues of $7 trillion already use, or soon will utilize "internal carbon prices", and this number is steadily increasing (The Economist, 2022). Large companies responsible for massive emissions each year, such as ExxonMobil and FedEx, have relatively straightforward plans to contribute their share to dealing with environmental degradation (The Economist, 2020). Take the example of FedEx. This powerful corporation in the logistics industry of the transportation sector published their latest report claiming that they have reduced their aircraft emissions intensity by 27% since 2005 and have avoided more than two million metric tons of carbon dioxide emission (FedEx, 2021).

However, being complacent is dangerous. More firms must take responsibility and take a lead in actual action and innovation. Reducing emissions is still a costly multi-lateral effort, and much hypocrisy and deception are involved. For example, very little data from China is discoverable on this matter and the lack of transparency on just where China's massive carbon footprint can be traced back to is not helpful for the global fight against climate change. Governments, firms, and individuals must remember that the only way to deal with climate change is to shed light on

the issues, not overcomplicate concepts, and take clear and decisive action to address issues one at a time.

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