

THE STUDENTS'
UNION
AT UWE



Decolonising and Decarbonising Masterclass

The Students' Union at UWE



INCLUSIVITY STATEMENT

The Students' Union at UWE welcomes all abilities/ disabilities, ages, religions, ethnicities, genders and sexual orientations into our spaces.

CONTENT WARNING

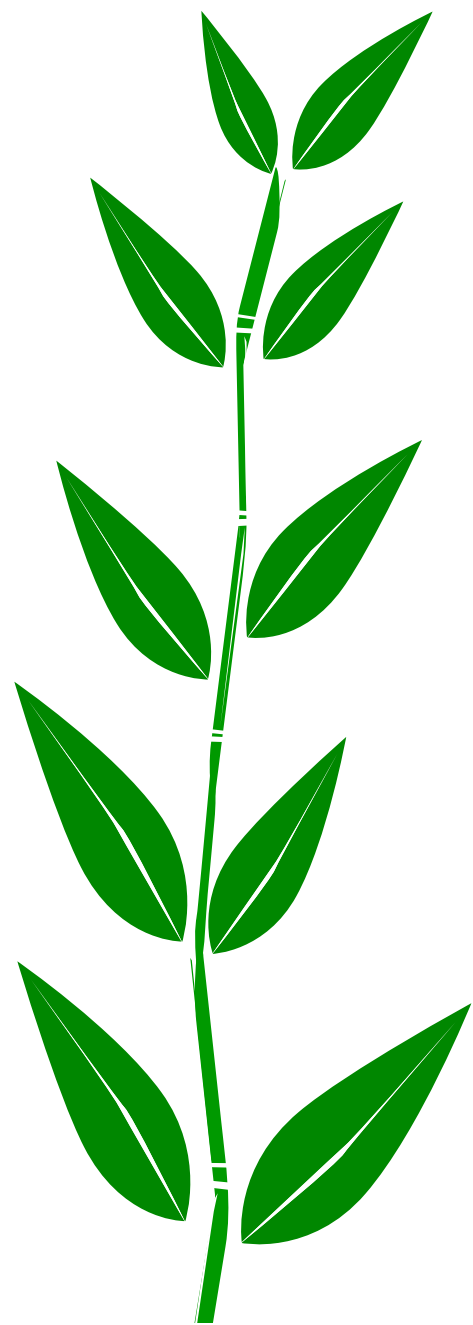
This masterclass covers topics such as racism, colonialism and slavery, which may be distressing. Please take some time out or leave the session if you wish.

Decolonising and Decarbonising at UWE



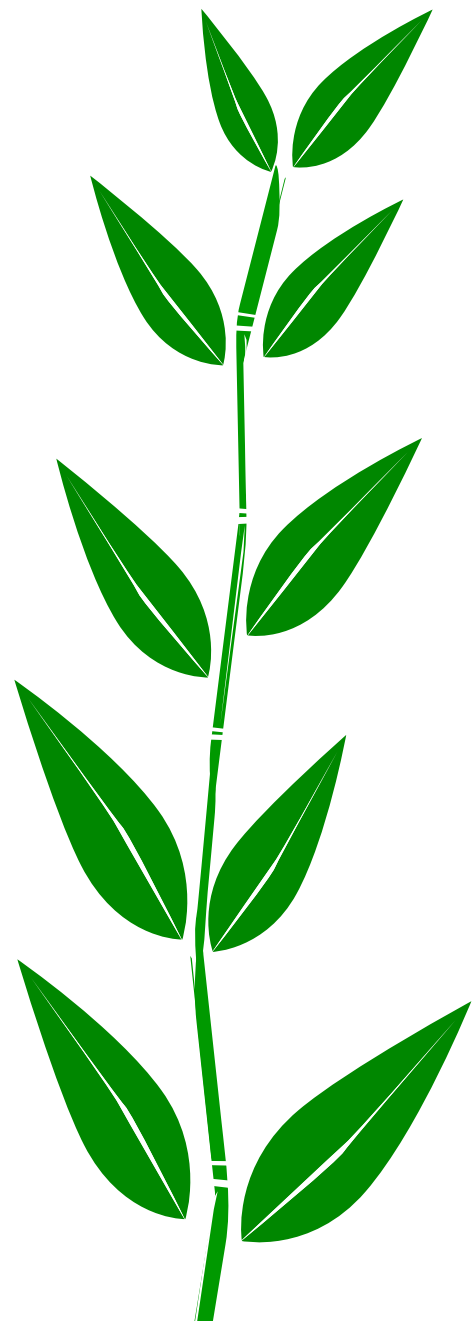
This session will cover:

- How decolonising and decarbonising are interdependent; one cannot happen without the other
- How you can go about these projects as a student rep and responsible citizen

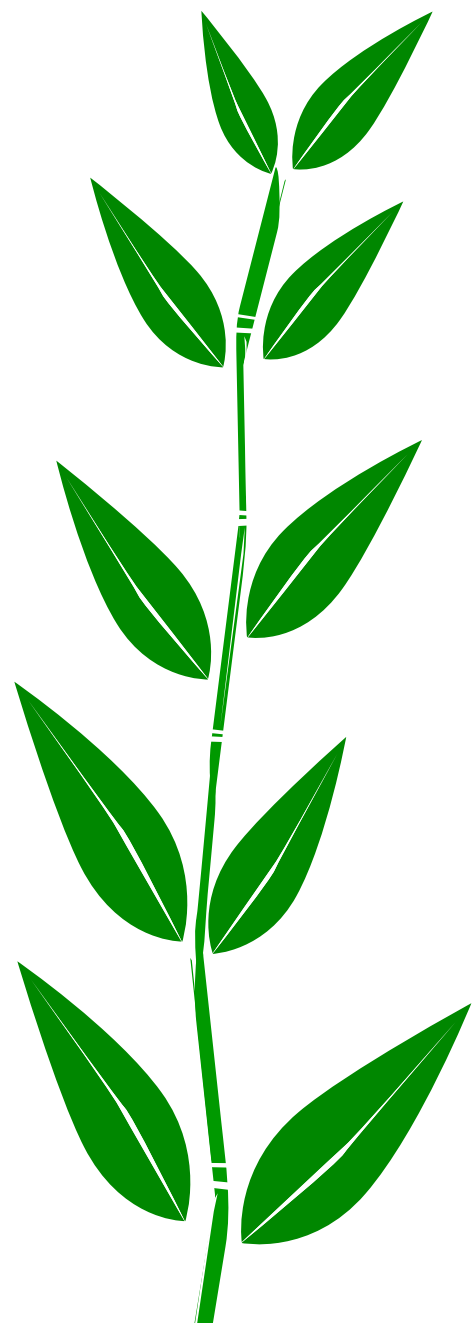


What are we talking about?

- What is decolonising?
- What is decarbonising?

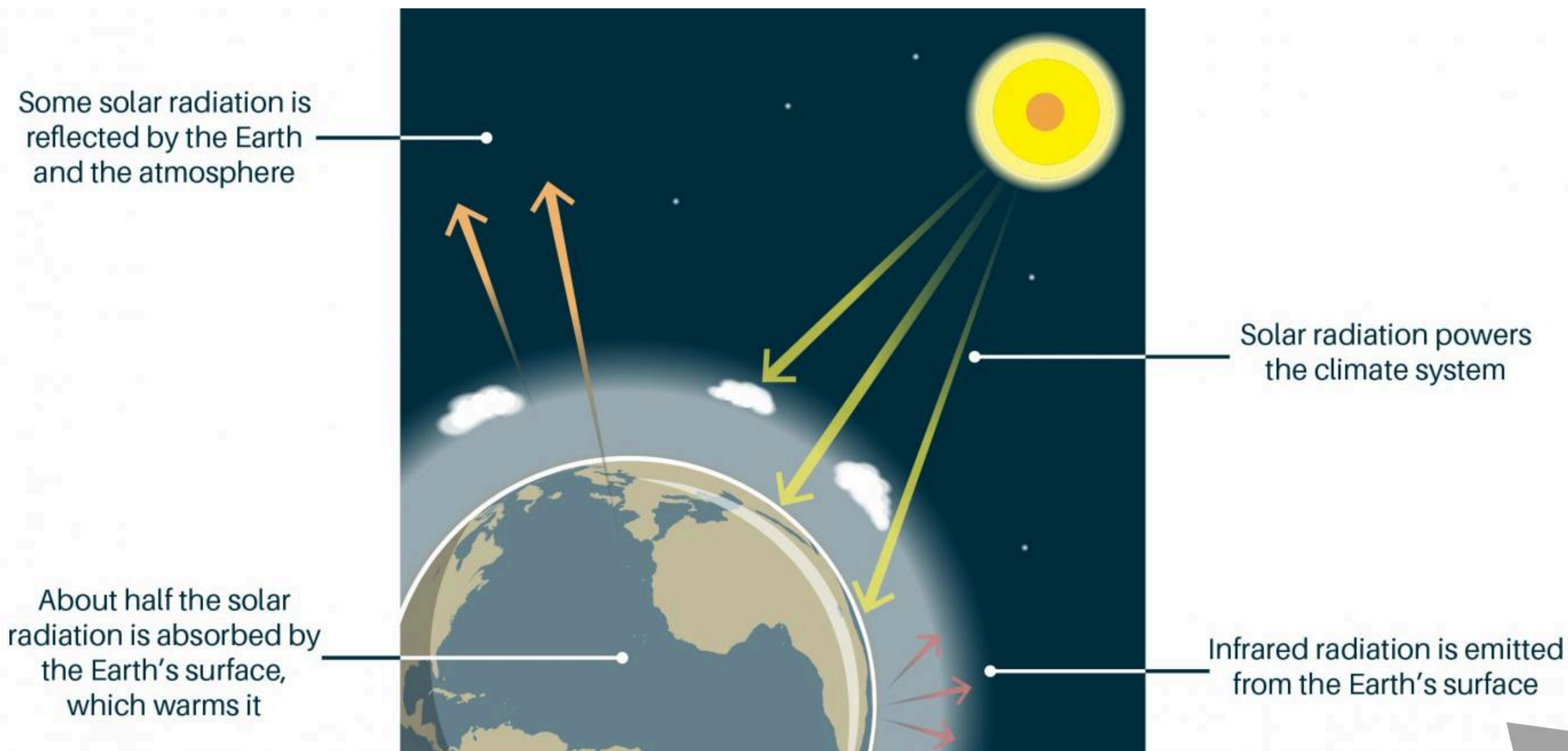


What are we talking about?



- Decolonising involves identifying colonial systems, structures and relationships, and working to challenge those systems
- Decarbonising is the process of stopping or reducing carbon gases, especially carbon dioxide, being released into the atmosphere as the result of a process.

How does carbon dioxide heat the planet?



(Source: [British Geological Survey](#))

Carbon and climate change



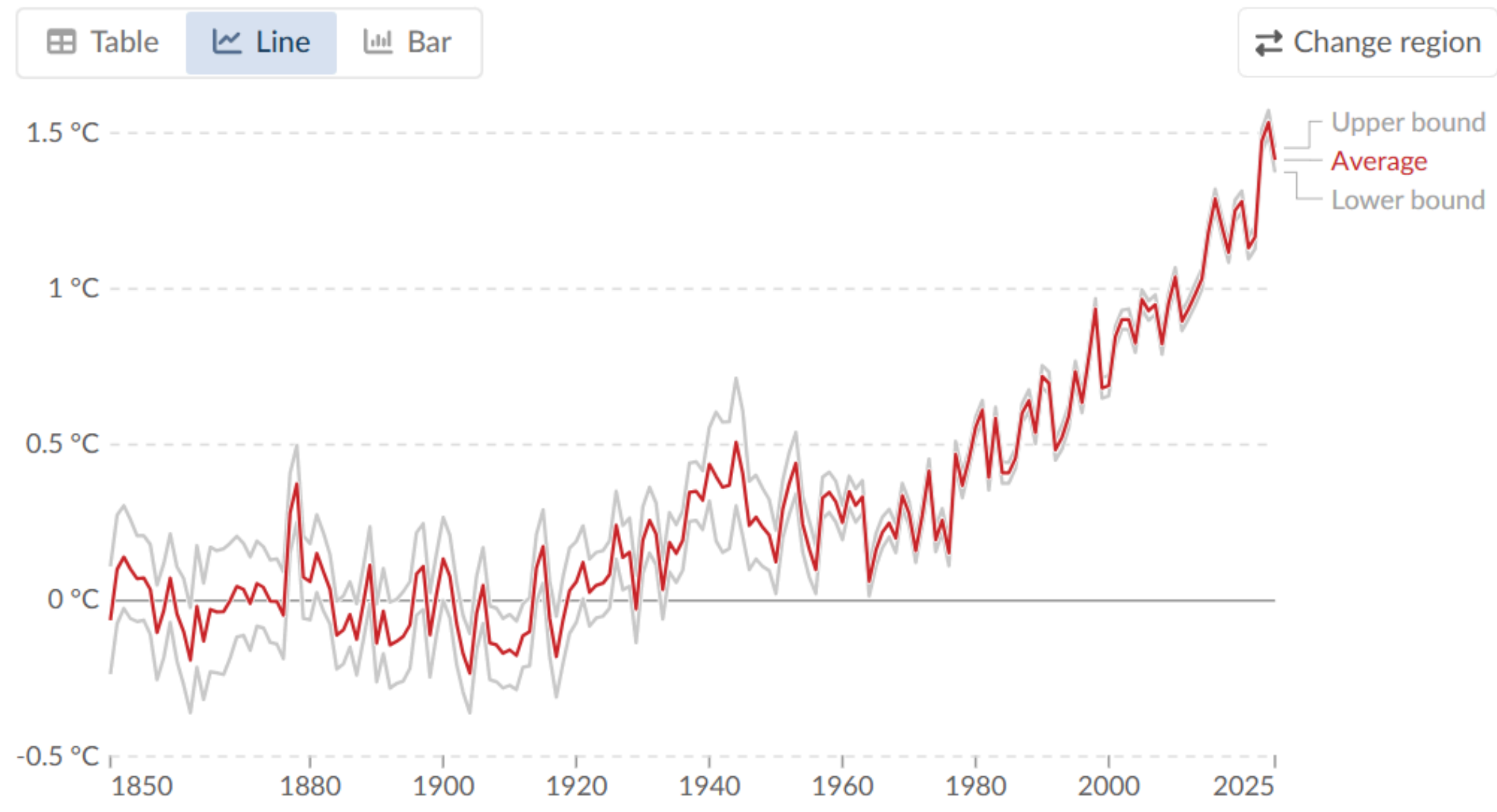
- Fossil fuels – coal, oil and gas – are by far the largest contributors to global climate change, accounting for around 68 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions and nearly 90 per cent of all carbon dioxide emissions. (United Nations, no date)
- Climate change is not a linear process: it can rapidly accelerate because of self-reinforcing dynamics such as permafrost melting.
- Global temperature is measured against ‘pre-industrial levels.’ We are currently at 1 degree; a 1.5 degree rise would lead to catastrophic and potentially irreversible sea level rises, extreme weather, species extinction, and the collapse of food systems.

How have carbon emissions grown over time?

Temperature change relative to the pre-industrial period, World

Our World
in Data

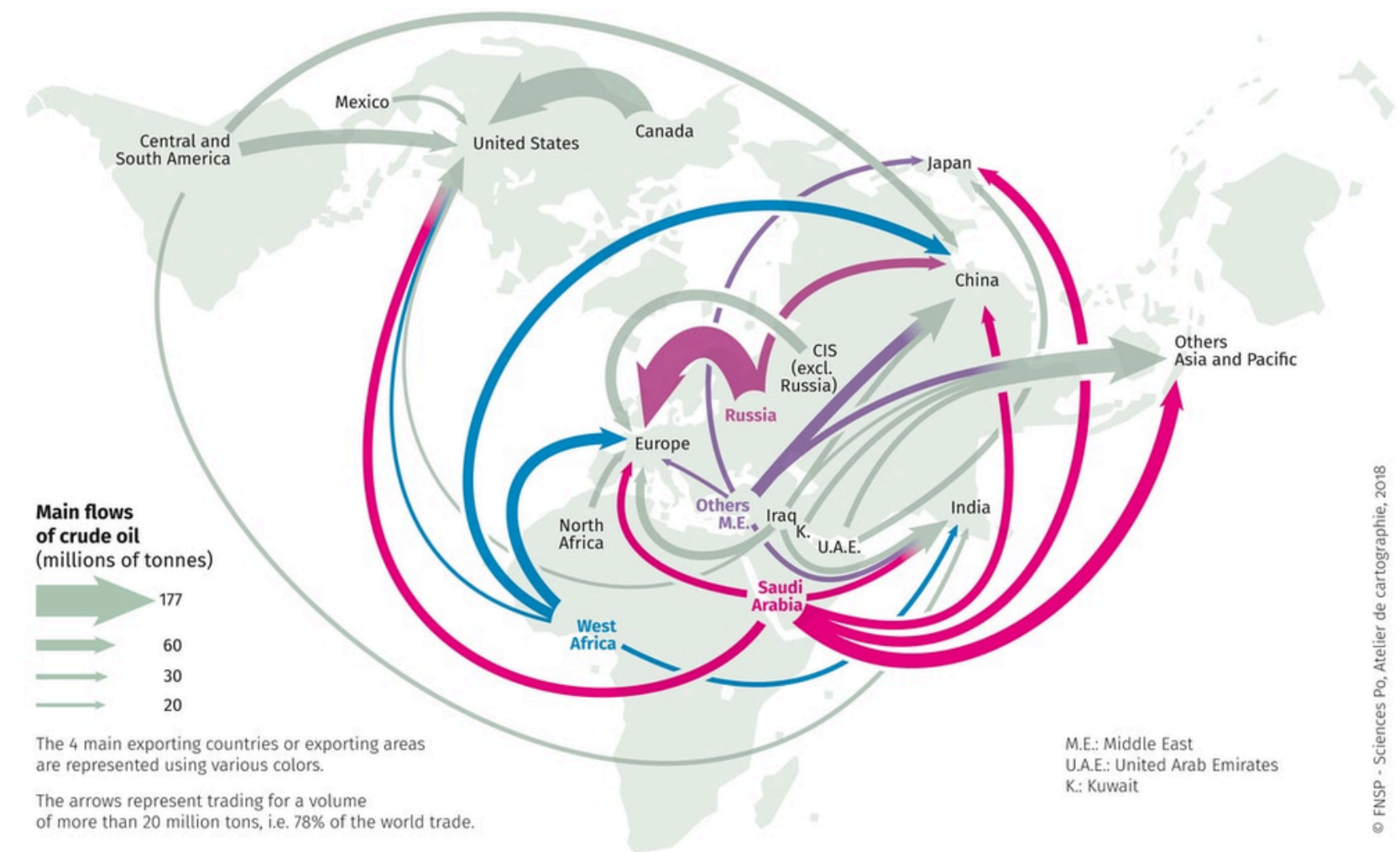
Temperature anomaly, measured as the difference between the average land-sea surface temperature in a given year and the 1861-1890 mean, in degrees Celsius.



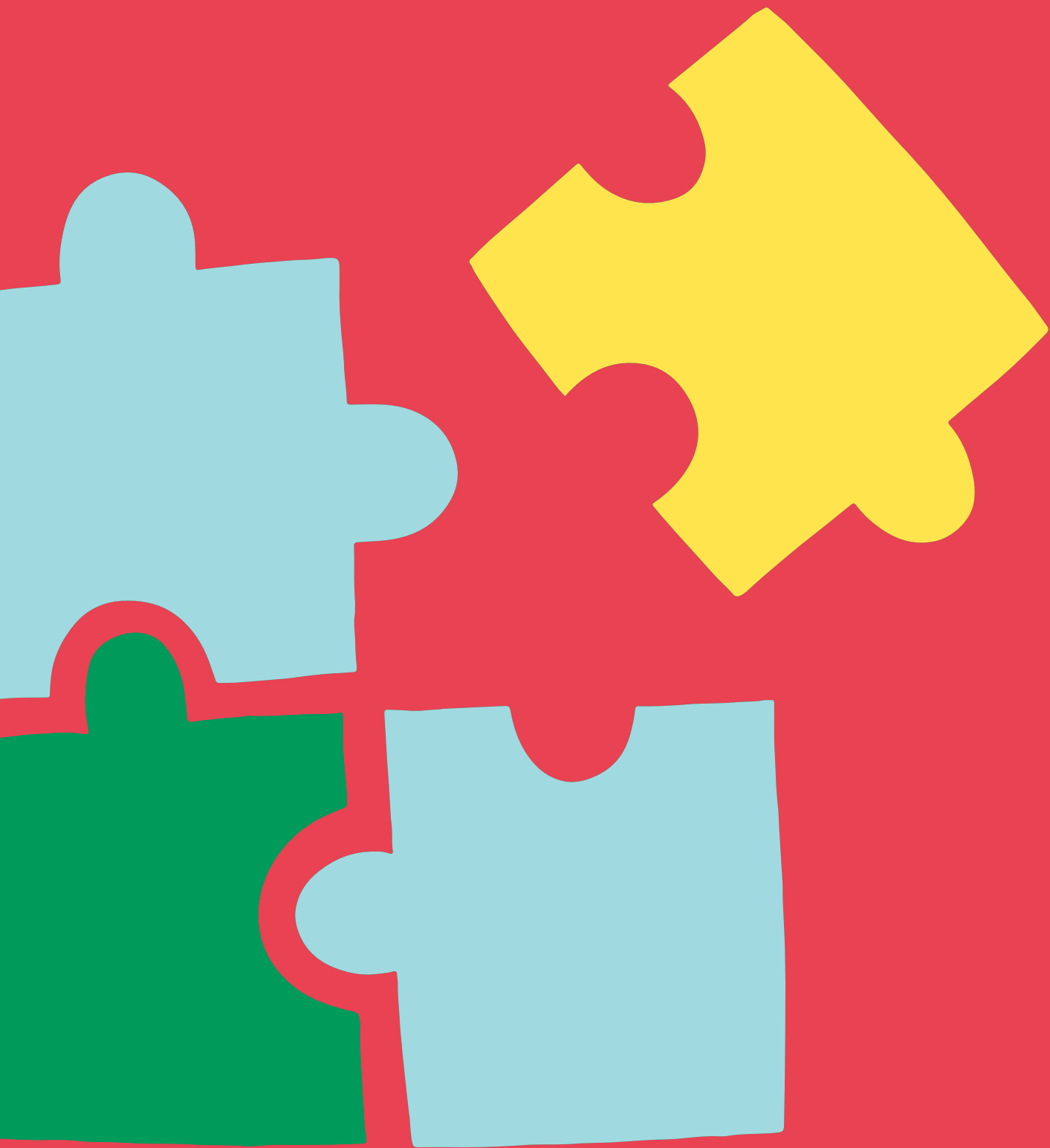
(Source: [van Vuuren et al., 2025](#)).

Carbon makes the world go round

- The invention of the Watts steam engine in 1776 is often marked as the beginning of industrial capitalism by enabling mass production, consumption and global trade.
- In 2025, fossil fuels supplied around 80% of the world's energy (ClientEarth, 2025)
- The global economy is still reliant on fossil fuel production: when fossil fuel trade is affected by wars in Ukraine or Iran, the cost of everything goes up.



Map of the oil trade, 2016 (Source: World Atlas of Global Issues).

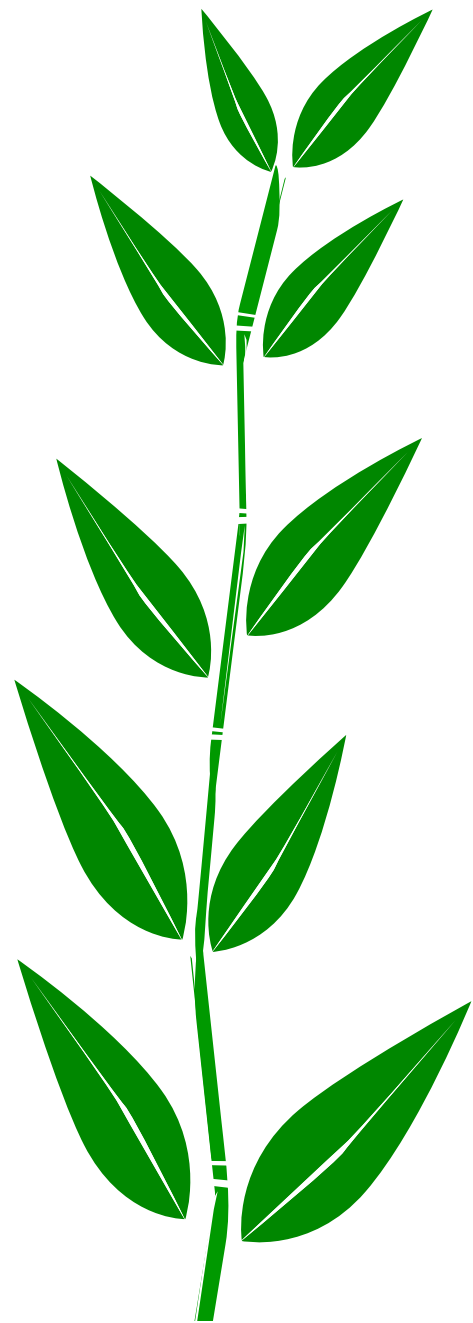


Yes, we know carbon emissions are bad. Where does decolonisation fit in?

John Gast's 'American Progress' (1872)



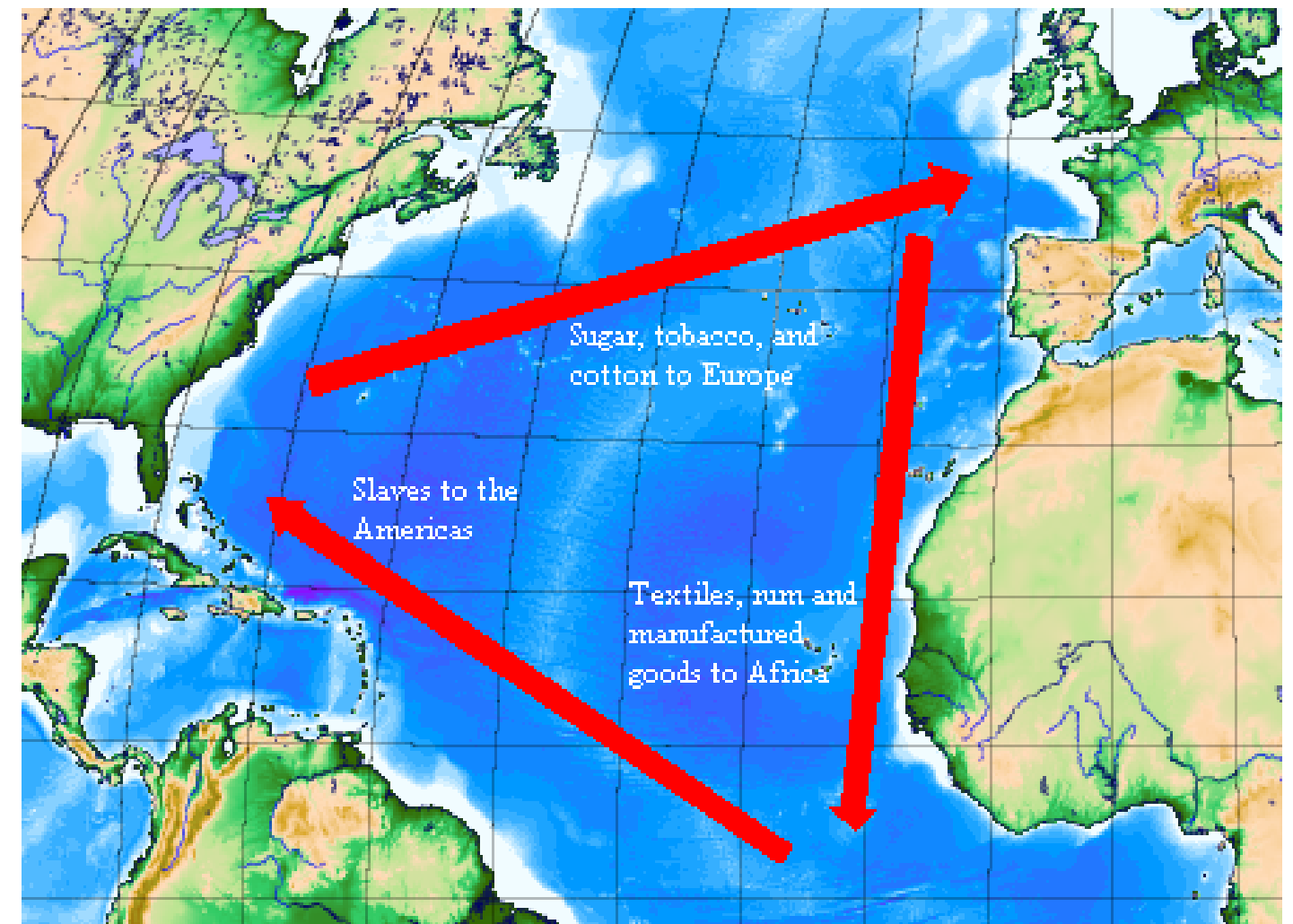
European colonialism



- Starting in the 15th century and rapidly accelerating during the industrial revolution, European armies seized the Global South through ‘settler’ or ‘exploitation’ colonies.
- The British Empire alone commanded 1/3 of the world.
- A racist economy based on the extraction of resources and people for profit, and a racist ideology based on the notion that white people are superior to the global majority and have the right to govern the rest of the world.

Carbon and slavery

- The Watts steam engine was funded directly from proceeds from slavery (Williams 1944).
- The 'Triangular Trade' system was built on steam-powered ships transporting over 12 million slaves from Africa.
- European industrialisation and the expansion of fossil fuels was only possible because of the abhorrent treatment of slaves and the racist notion that people of colour don't matter.



The Triangular Trade system
(Source: [Wikipedia](#))

Bristol, UWE and slavery

- Society of Merchant Venturers effectively controlled Bristol's economy for 250 years, earning money from shipbuilding and plantation products such as sugar and tobacco (Merchant Venturers).
- A quarter of a million slaves were transported on Bristol slave voyages. When slavery was abolished, MV plantation owners were compensated an equivalent of £149m (Bristol Live).
- UWE was originally founded as a 'Navigation School' for the Merchant Venturers in 1595 (UWE).



An art installation next to the former statue of Merchant Venturer Edward Colston

Carbon and the colonial world economy

- The triangular trade system in the Atlantic and the broader colonial economy of extraction had clear roles for colonisers and colonies.
- Slavery and horrific labour practices meant that colonies would cheaply produce raw materials such as crude oil, fabrics and ores, while colonisers would produce more profitable manufactured products to sell to each other, such as cars, radios and refined oil (Wallerstein, 2004).



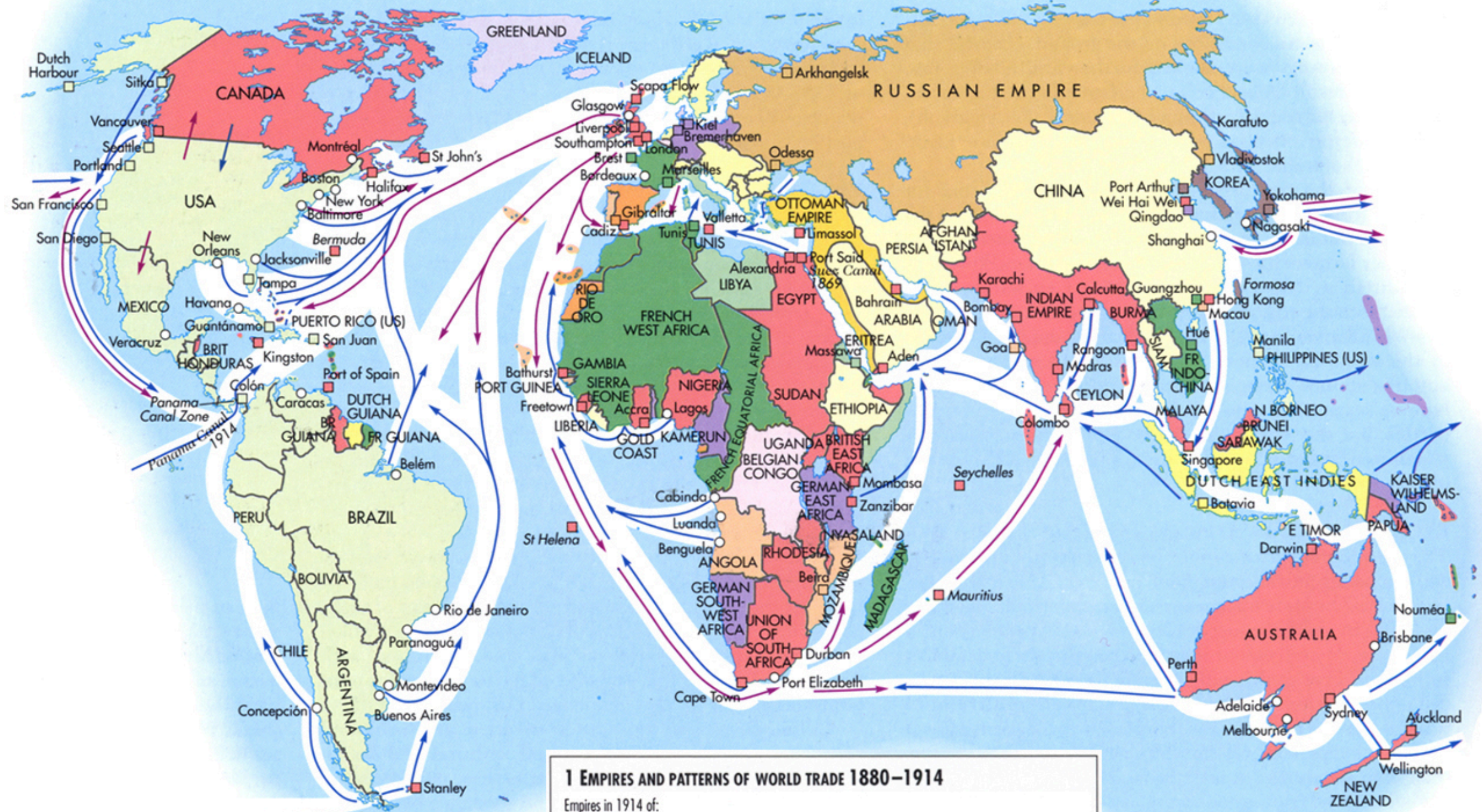
Cartoon representing the colonisation of Africa (Source: [The Guardian](#))

Carbon and the colonial world economy

- To ensure colonies only produced cheap products, colonisers deliberately deindustrialised colonies, which led to millions of deaths through man-made famines (Davis, 2000). At the same time, the cheap oil from colonies financed the emergence of massive Western oil conglomerates.
- For example, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (which later became BP) was established in 1908 to facilitate oil extraction from present-day Iran. Oil extraction remained high even during the avoidable 1917-19 Persian famine which killed up to 10 million people, which was 50% of the population (Edalati and Imani, 2024).



Photograph of the Persian Famine
(Source: Pat Walsh)



▲ The strengthening of colonial rule was linked to a number of economic and political factors, including the need for raw materials to supply rapidly industrializing economies and the desire to find new markets for manufactured goods.

EMPIRES AND PATTERNS OF WORLD TRADE 1880-1914

Empires in 1914 of:

■ Britain	■ Belgium	■ Independent country
■ France	■ Denmark	■ Independent country previously under European control
■ Germany	■ Italy	— Major shipping route
■ Portugal	■ Turkey	→ Main trade in raw materials
■ Spain	■ Russia	→ Main trade in manufactured goods
■ Netherlands	■ Japan	□ Major base and coaling station

(Colonial Trading Routes Map (Source: [The British Empire Website](http://www.thebritishempire.com)))

Carbon and the colonial 'civilising mission'

- Colonialism involved the extermination not just of people, but of their ways of understanding nature and each other.
- Colonialism imposed a sharp 'nature vs society' binary on cultures which viewed humanity and nature as interdependent (Moore, 2016).
- White masculine virtues: the good, civilised man is 'industrious' and encouraged to dominate 'Mother' nature (Mies, 1986).



'La mission civilisatrice', a 1911 cartoon in French magazine Le Petit Journal



**Hasn't colonialism
finished now?**

Colonialism and Neocolonialism

- As many countries achieved formal independence from colonial rule starting in the 1940s, former colonisers started new global institutions such as the UN, the World Bank (WB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).
- The rich countries which amassed their wealth through colonial exploitation then embarked on a project of the 'development' of former colonies to improve living standards across the world.
- However, many former colonies came to realise that 'development' became a new method to exploit them, known as 'Neocolonialism' (Nkrumah, 1966)



The founding UN Summit in 1945

Neocolonial 'development'

- Under the WB and IMF, many former colonies could only access the loans and international aid they needed to function if they agreed to keep labour prices low and allow Western companies to buy their oil and other resources cheaply.
- When these projects inevitably failed to 'develop' former colonies, they were forced to take on even more debt to extreme levels.
- Many commentators point out that although colonialism has formally ended, the system of exploitation continues because of enforced unequal trade (see further reading)



Illustration of Africa's financial flows (Source: [Debt Justice 2017](#))

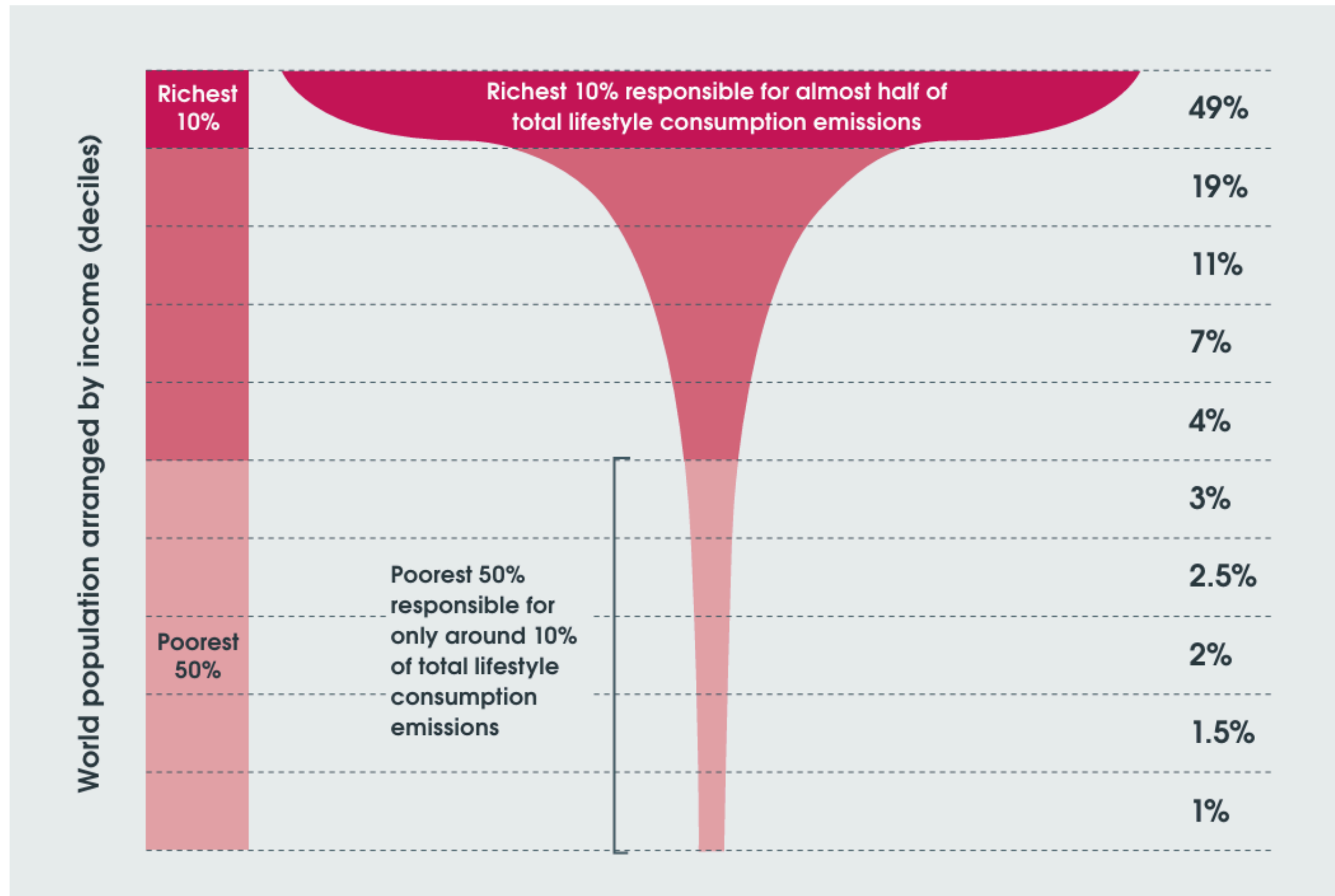
Unequal causes and effects of climate change

- The people who are least responsible for climate change are the people who are most impacted.
- Research points out that the Global North is responsible for 92% of global carbon emissions ([Eos, 2020](#)). Meanwhile, Global South countries are disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of climate change such as rising sea levels, drought, hurricanes, and desertification ([Fair Planet, 2024](#))
- Many point out that the racist hierarchy of ‘who matters’ is necessary for the suffering of former colonies to be allowed to continue ([Yarde, 2022](#))



Extreme damage during Hurricane Melissa in Jamaica, a country which has remained poor since colonial times and cannot afford to adapt to climate change ([BBC, 2025](#))

Graph 1: Percentage of CO₂ emissions by world population



Reproduced from Oxfam *Extreme Carbon Inequality*, 2015

(Source: [Global Justice Now, 2022](#))

The Climate Justice Movement

- The increasing recognition of these issues has led to the emergence of 'Climate Justice', the concept that inequality and climate change are intertwined and must be tackled together.
- The Climate Justice Movement, including many Global South countries, indigenous groups and activist movements in the Global North, is becoming more vocal in their calls for climate justice.
- Common demands include debt cancellation and 'climate reparations' where former colonies pay for the green transition and for genuine, sustainable development.



Protests in Nairobi, Kenya to demand climate action ([Global Citizen, 2019](#))



**Can we do anything
about it at UWE?**

Yes!

- The science shows that currently, there is still time to transition to a green economy that avoids dangerous 'tipping points' ([Natural History Museum 2025](#))
- While climate change is already threatening billions of people across the world, by the same logic, any reduction in carbon emissions will also save the livelihoods of billions.
- Although Universities have historically provided research and technology for unsustainable industries, they are increasingly looking to contribute to solutions to climate change and global inequality - but sometimes they need encouraging by students.



Solar panels at UWE

Engage with the SU!

- The SU has a range of means through which you can shape policy and inform what issues we lobby the University on:
- Join the Green Team, the SU's sustainability group.
- Student Ideas: Come up with an idea and make SU policy!
- Elections: We've just had our elections and our Presidents handover will be in the Summer. Let our current and future Presidents know what you think about these issues. We will also have a new Sustainability Officer, Ashley.



Sustainability Governance at UWE

- UWE has a Sustainability Governance structure to ensure that sustainability is embedded across the university, however there are always competing imperatives and things the university could be better on.
- Have a look at UWE's Sustainability Executive Committee. The SU President always attends these and one VP.
- Some relevant policies are the Climate Action and Sustainability Strategy, Environmental Sustainability Policy, Ethical Investment Policy, Ethical Careers Framework, and the Handbook of Research Ethics.



Decolonising the Curriculum

- More and more courses at UWE are making efforts to Decolonise their Curricula. If your course hasn't done this yet, talk to your rep/cohort about it to ask your Programme Leader to do this!
- This is for every course, not just social sciences. There is always an opportunity to explore your discipline's connection to colonialism and how your discipline can be part of solutions to pressing global problems.
- Reach out to the Library Team for assistance through their online form

The screenshot shows the UWE Bristol Reading Lists interface. At the top left is the UWE Bristol logo. At the top right are links for 'Students', 'Staff', and 'Alumni'. Below the logo is a dark teal navigation bar with 'Reading Lists' in white text. Underneath this bar are links for 'Home', 'My Lists', 'My Bookmarks', 'Feedback', 'Log In', and a help icon. The main content area features the title 'Inclusive Global Compendium' with 'View & Export' and '+ My Lists' buttons to its right. Below the title, it lists the authors: 'By Philip O'Shaughnessy, Ludo Sebire, Sarah Fleetwood-Florey, Hooman Foroughmand Araabi, Nick Drofiak, Ann de Graft-Johnson, Annie Bellamy, Oliver Lawrence, Neil Light'. It also shows 'Created a year ago | Updated 14 hours ago' and 'Linked to LIBRARY001'. A control bar contains 'Table of Contents', 'Type: All', 'Filter: All', 'Citation Style: None', and a search box. A welcome message reads: 'Welcome to this collaborative resource list!'. Below that, a paragraph states: 'This resource aims to be a place in which to share and collect a diverse and inclusive list of not just building precedents but practitioners/practice from related disciplines, ways of working, research, and multi/interdisciplinary approaches from around the world. It is a partial directory of Black, Asian, Indigenous, Global Majority, LGBTQIA+, Disabled and/or minoritised placemaking practitioners and theorists,* and of practitioners and theorists with other protected characteristics: always unfinished, forever incomplete.'

Architecture's 'Inclusive Global Compendium'

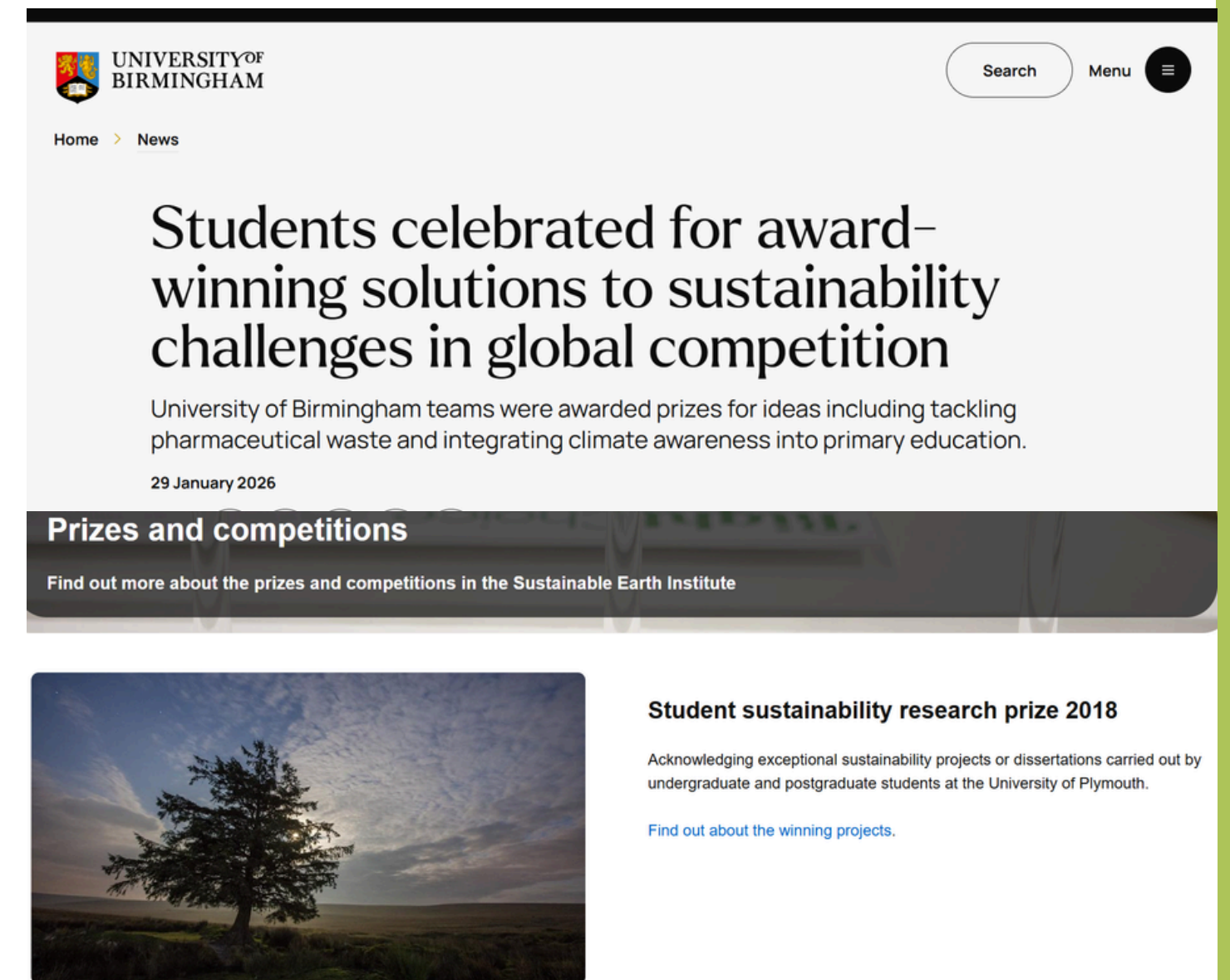
Embedding climate problem-solving into your course

Speak to your cohort/student rep and then raise this with your Programme Leader. Some questions to think about:

- What resources do your course use and are they sustainable?
- How has your course encouraged good environmental practice?
- Does your course give you the skills to access sustainable job opportunities within the relevant sector?
- If the School has any partnerships with external companies, do those companies have good social and environmental records?

Sustainability Prizes

- It is becoming more and more common for University Schools and courses to have their own extra-curricula ‘sustainability prizes’, whereby students are invited to come up with a solution to a problem related to climate justice.
- Think about whether this should be course-based or School-based, whatever works for you.
- Speak to your cohort/rep about this and raise it with your Programme Leader.



The screenshot shows a news article from the University of Birmingham. The header includes the university logo and name, a search bar, and a menu icon. The breadcrumb trail reads 'Home > News'. The main headline is 'Students celebrated for award-winning solutions to sustainability challenges in global competition'. Below the headline is a sub-headline: 'University of Birmingham teams were awarded prizes for ideas including tackling pharmaceutical waste and integrating climate awareness into primary education.' The date is '29 January 2026'. A dark banner below the article reads 'Prizes and competitions' with a link: 'Find out more about the prizes and competitions in the Sustainable Earth Institute'. Below this is a section for 'Student sustainability research prize 2018' with a description: 'Acknowledging exceptional sustainability projects or dissertations carried out by undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Plymouth.' and a link: 'Find out about the winning projects.' To the left of this text is a photograph of a large tree in a field under a cloudy sky.

SDG Mapping

- Some courses have begun mapping their courses according to the ‘Sustainable Development Goals’, the UN’s goals to tackle the world’s environmental, economic and social problems.
- Find out from your Programme Leader if your course has done this yet, and if not, ask them to do it!



Outside UWE

- Engage with the Democratic process: vote in national and local elections, contact your elected representatives.
- Join an activist group about Climate Justice: Global Justice Now, Debt Justice, Green New Deal Rising or Tipping Point.
- Keep up to date about Climate Justice news, which is often poorly represented in mainstream outlets. Try OpenDemocracy or the New Internationalist.



Green New Deal Rising
action outside Westminster,
2023

Some useful negotiating tips for reps

- Gather feedback from your course about sustainability so you have some good evidence. They are much more likely to listen if you have more than one voice behind you.
- Remind them that prospective students are increasingly researching universities' sustainability credentials and it may help student recruitment.
- Remind them of UWE's Sustainability Strategy which commits them to “equip successive generations of students with the knowledge and commitment to address the ongoing challenges of sustainability”
- Being better than other universities alone is not good enough, there is always more work to do.



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**Thanks for attending this
masterclass!**

The Students' Union at UWE



Bibliography (where I can't provide links)

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