Personal sustainability

Personal sustainability is the act of living in a way that minimises the impact on the environment, society, and climate, while promoting positive behaviour change. It involves making a series of conscious choices in daily life that reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) and thus contribute to the overall long-term well-being of both you and the planet.

There is a mountain of evidence that shows that humanity's future existence (as we know it) depends on mitigating rises in global temperatures and changes in climate by reducing greenhouse gases. This isn't the first[1] time that civilizations have been destroyed by changing climate,[2] but this is the first time that the entire planet has been affected. Faced with changing climate because of man-made emissions, we need to learn the lessons of long-past civilizations and adapt to changing circumstances by adapting how we live, and by reducing our emissions.

While most GHGs originate from a few companies,[3] households contribute around 75% of global carbon emissions on a consumption basis. This suggests that the impact of individuals changing behaviours can have a significant impact on global patterns of GHG emissions. More importantly, individuals can be catalysts for change in their community. The solution seems simple: change individual spending habits, to better align with individual desires and reduce personal carbon footprints. While this is useful, most individual carbon footprints are created by normal consumption – not conscious discretionary spending, such as travelling by plane for vacations for pleasure or buying food from companies that use plastic containers. It all adds up.

MEASURING THE CARBON FOOTPRINT

How does this affect your carbon footprint? Everyone's carbon footprint is different, and depending on the calculator you use, the calculation will be a bit different. This is illustrated in Figure 1. Any measurement of personal GHG emissions will however include the following categories:

House-related emissions

- Appliances (including stoves, fridges, and dishwashers)
- Heater / air conditioning units
- Lights
- Computers, cell phones and other electronics

Transport - related emissions

- Air transport
- Mass transit / public transport
- Car
- Motorcycles

Sources of secondary emissions

- Food / drink
- Pharmaceuticals
- Clothes / textiles / shoes
- Paper-based products
- Hotels / restaurants / pubs
- Mobile and broadband infrastructure (phone, internet, streaming service, etc)
- Education
- Banking, other finance and insurance services
- Sports, culture and recreation

Figure 1: Carbon Footprint Tracking

Source: *Derived from www.carbontracker.org*

YOUR CARBON FOOTPRINT

House:	**2.69 metric tons of CO_2e**
Flights:	**0.46 metric tons of CO2e**
Car:	**2.77 metric tons of CO_2e**
Motorbike:	**0.00 metric tons of CO_2e**
Bus and Rail:	**0.00 metric tons of CO_2e**
Secondary:	**4.65 metric tons of CO_2e**
TOTAL:	**10.57 METRIC TONS OF CO_2E**

- Your footprint is **10.57** metric tons per year
- The average footprint for people in Trinidad and Tobago is **12.78** metric tons
- The average for the European Union is about **6.8** metric tons
- The average worldwide carbon footprint is about **4.79** metric tons
- The worldwide target to combat climate change is **0** metric ton

Figure 2: Example of a Personal Carbon Footprint

Source: *Carbon Tracker www.carbontracker.org*

REDUCING ONE'S GHG FOOTPRINT IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

The example in Figure 2 underscores some of the challenges faced by average citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who may wish to address their carbon footprint. These include limited infrastructure, economic constraints, and societal norms. That said, some work has begun to build up GHG-friendly alternatives to reduce GHG emissions. There are several businesses that offer recycling services, with the most visible initiative being the Environmental Management Authority's iCARE recycling bins, installed in communities across the country. Supermarkets are stocking more locally produced fruits and vegetables, allowing consumers to reduce their food miles – the distance between the source of their food and its market.

Where food is concerned, a lower GHG lifestyle can be achieved through a diet rich in plant-based foods, with fewer animal proteins. This can confer both improved health and environmental benefits. However, Trinidad and Tobago remains a major food importer, with the annual food import bill in Trinidad and Tobago on average over TT$5 billion.[4] Local agriculture initiatives must be stepped up to increase the availability of fresh local food, as consumption of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and legumes will have to double, and consumption of foods such as red meat and sugar will have to be reduced by more than 50%, to fulfil the goal of a low GHG diet.[5] Despite the challenge of food costs, simple daily changes – reducing energy use, water conservation, composting, minimising plastic use, do make a measurable difference.

Social and cultural norms are another barrier that must be overcome. Trinidad and Tobago is responsible for some 3.6 kg of plastic waste generated per capita per day, a logical consequence of littering culture and inadequate means to dispose of plastic. One solution to this is involvement in local initiatives towards recycling, repurposing, low carbon initiatives and sustainability. Collective initiatives can have a real impact in your community, even in an environment of real and systemic barriers to being a good ecological citizen, such as legacy regulations and statutes, or lacking or insufficient low-carbon infrastructure.

The reality is that these individual actions are necessary to mitigate the effects of global warming, for our collective future. Achieving a carbon zero future - or even carbon neutrality – requires all hands on deck. It is a journey that must continue, with conscious adjustments made as personal circumstances change. If we all prioritise sustainability in our personal lives, we can make considerable progress as a country.

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[i] *Emily Sohn "Climate change and the rise and fall of civilizations" (2014) https://climate.nasa.gov/news/1010/climate-change-and-the-rise-and-fall-of-civilizations/*

[ii] *Catie Leary "8 Ancient Civilizations That Were Destroyed by Climate Change" (October 21, 2021) https://www.treehugger.com/ancient-civilizations-were-destroyed-climate-change-4869712*

[iii] *Johnathan Watts "Just 57 companies linked to 80% of greenhouse gas emissions since 2016" The Guardian. April 4, 2024. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/apr/04/just-57-companies-linked-to-80-of-greenhouse-gas-emissions-since-2016. Data from CarbonMajors "The Carbon Majors Database – Launch Report" (April 2024) https://carbonmajors.org/site//data/000/027/Carbon_Majors_Launch_Report.pdf*

[iv] *Government of Trinidad and Tobago. Ministry of Trade and Industry "Government Proactive in Mitigating Impact of Rising Global Food Prices" (March 2022) https://tradeind.gov.tt/government-proactive-in-mitigating-impact-of-rising-global-food-prices/*

[v] *Ecowatch "Future Foods: What Will People Eat in 2050?" https://www.ecowatch.com/future-food-human-diet-predictions.html*

Some GHG calculators include:

https://www.carbonfootprint.com/calculator.aspx
https://www3.epa.gov/carbon-footprint-calculator/ (also has an offline Excel spreadsheet)
https://www.nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/carbon-footprint-calculator/
https://traveltomorrow.com/5-apps-that-can-help-you-track-your-carbon-footprint/

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