7 October 2020

France: Forty percent of greenhouse gases generated to meet the demand of households and businesses are emitted abroad

A report by the Haut Conseil pour le Climat (HCC – High Council for the Climate) published on 6 October 2020 entitled « Controlling the carbon footprint of France » (« Maîtriser l'empreinte carbone de la France », in French) provides new insights into one aspect of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that is often overlooked, namely emissions linked to imported goods consumed in France, an issue that we already had the opportunity to address on hungerexplained.org and on which data were so far insufficient [read].

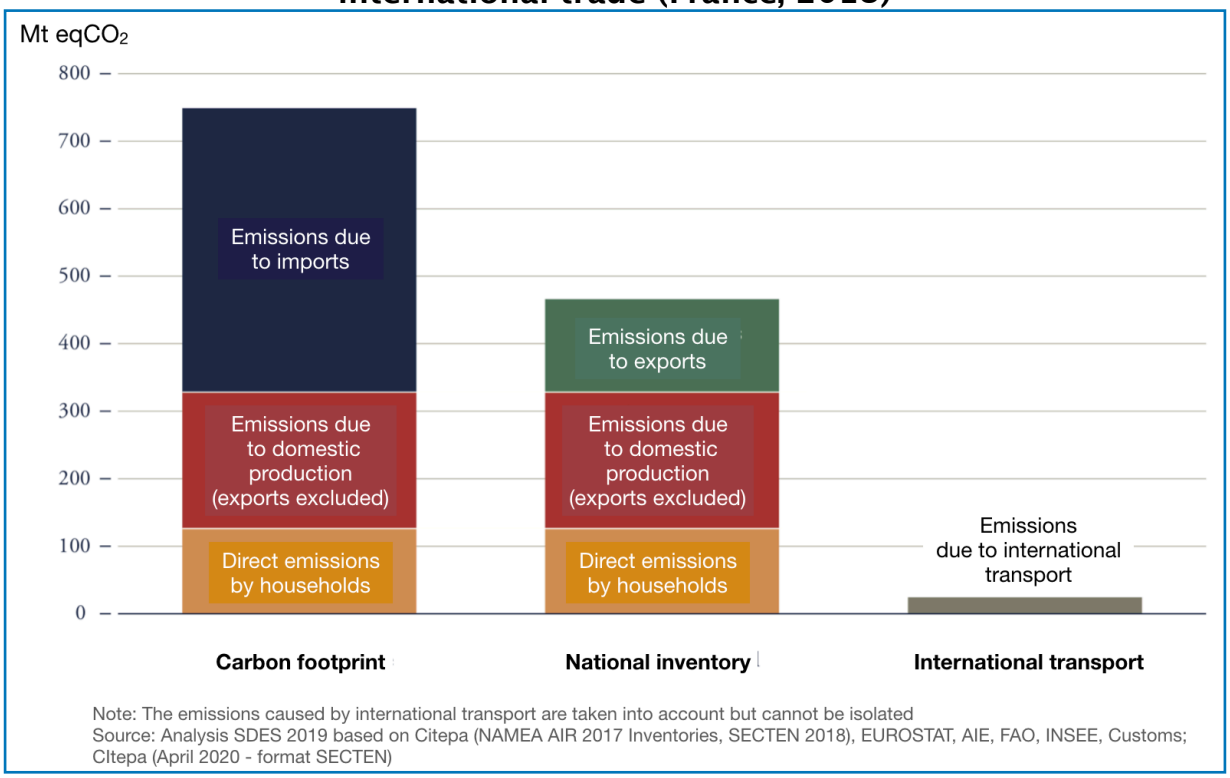
In this report, the HCC defines France's carbon footprint as "all pressures exerted on the climate by French domestic demand, whatever the geographic origin of the consumed goods". It is worth noting, as stated by the report, that "imported emissions, exported emissions and emissions caused by international transport" are not taken into account in the framework of existing commitments on the reduction of GHG, even though they are part of the carbon footprint.

The HCC estimates that France's carbon footprint – including imported emissions, direct emissions by households and emissions resulting from domestic production, exports excluded – was of 749 million tonnes CO_2 equivalent in 2018 (roughly 2% of global emissions) which corresponds to 11.5 tonnes CO_2 equivalent per inhabitant.

It is interesting to note that territorial GHG emissions (i.e.GHGs emitted within the national territory) only represented around 60% of France's carbon footprint (or 445 million tonnes CO_2 equivalent), the rest being made of emissions taking place outside of the national territory but whose objective is to meet the national demand of businesses as well as of households (see **Diagramme 1**).

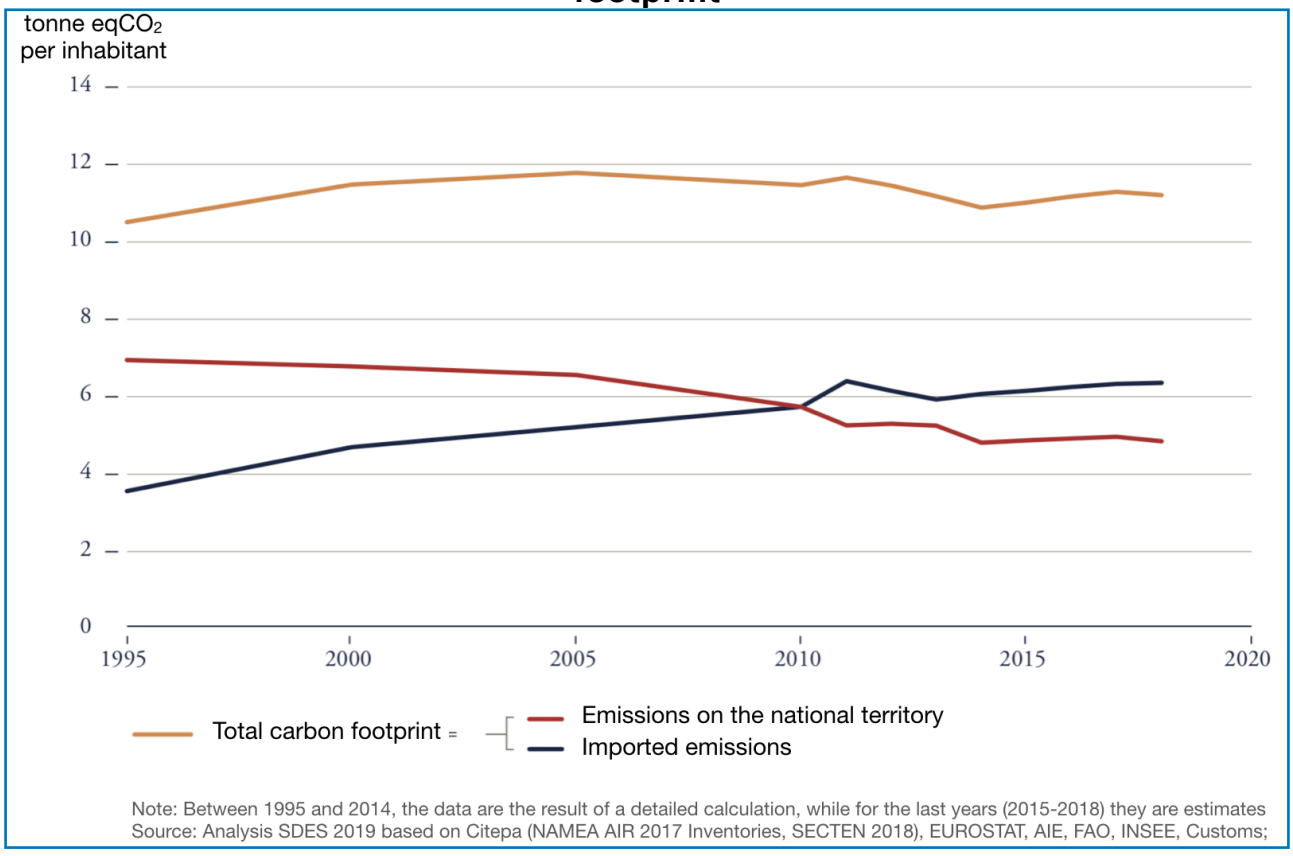
Yet, until now, the effort to cut GHGs was almost exclusively directed at territorial emissions which decreased since 2005, while imported emissions continued to grow (see **Diagramme 2**). This has, in a way, amounted to transferring the reduction of France's territorial emissions to the rest of the world, in particular to countries in the EU and to China that is eagerly designated as being the main culprit of GHG emissions, while a large part of its emissions is due to the production of goods that non-Chinese – among whom the French – will consume with a clear conscience regarding their own GHG emission data.

Diagramme 1 : Indicators of territorial emissions and of emissions linked to international trade (France, 2018)



Source: HCC (translated by the author)

Diagramme 2 : Evolution in time of emissions included in the carbon footprint



Source: HCC (translated by the author)

Another useful indication provided by the HCC report is that only around one fourth of imported emissions comes from countries that have committed to achieve carbon neutrality.

It is quite evident from what has just been seen that a policy focused exclusively on reducing territorial GHG emissions gives little chance to France – or, for that matter, to most countries – to achieve carbon neutrality. It will also be necessary to reduce emissions related to imports. However, this eventual reduction will largely depend on the choices made by French businesses and households in what they will purchase or consume.

The logical implication of what is stated in the HCC report is that it is crucial to have good carbon footprint indicators (like for example a carbon score that would be similar to the food score) that provide needed and easily understandable information (including on induced deforestation) to orient business and consumer decisions. This idea is suggested in the HCC report.

There is one thing, however, that the report forgets to mention explicitly. That is that in addition to influencing behaviour through information, it will also be necessary to consider other measures – if information is not sufficient –, in particular to apply the unpopular carbon tax (at the border or generalised) that, while making goods that create large GHG emissions more expensive, would also generate revenues that could be used for:

- investing in solutions for reducing GHGs;
- assisting the more vulnerable households;
- helping trade partners to improve their technology so as to reduce their GHG emissions when producing goods imported by France.

In our opinion, the report is too shy when it comes to suggesting measures that could have an impact on exchanges with trade partners. It only mentions some vague “diplomatic action” that would influence the content of future free trade agreements (with Mercosur, for example) and “a carbon adjustment aiming at rebalancing competitiveness of European businesses with trade partners who would not have an ambitious climate policy”, which, in diplomatic terms, amounts to making an implicit reference to a carbon tax at the border.

We can therefore be happy with this HCC report that meets a specific demand of the French government that can be summarised in the following question: “What is the carbon footprint of the goods that we import and how can we reduce it efficiently?” We may applaud the report, as it does put things into perspective by considering a dimension of our carbon footprint that is often overlooked.

The report can also be credited for stressing the importance of decisions taken by households and businesses in the evolution of GHG emissions. We will use the opportunity of the publication of this report to emphasise once more the usefulness of creating GHG accounts for individuals, households and businesses.

Similarly to the data presented in the HCC report, individual accounts make it possible for everyone to know how they fit within the national (and global) effort to reduce GHG and to monitor their own emissions [read].

We received reactions to our article on this subject that mentioned that there are already tools available for each of us to compute our carbon foot print (see examples here and here). These tools, although useful, are either too aggregated or very cumbersome to use, and it is unlikely that the mass of people will adopt them: they require to collect a relatively large amount of detailed data and require to invest time for generating reliable results. The concept that we proposed consists in supplying to each person, household or business, an account established on the basis of data available with suppliers and banks, among others, on their consumption (energy, travel, food and other purchases), and to infer from it the resulting GHG emissions. Rather than considering in detail each of activities, as proposed in some available calculators – a potentially boring activity that might stumble over failing memories, it is possible to account indirectly and automatically for the large aggregates that constitute consumption and deduct the GHGs. This is a feasible approach and it has the advantage of producing results without obliging the user to get involved in off-putting computations.

In the case of France, we suggest again here to mobilise a small part of the 30 billion euros of the « France-Relance » recovery plan, in order to develop such a tool.

Thus equipped, all will be in a position to manage their choices and monitor how their decisions impact on their level of GHG emission.

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To know more:

- Jean Fouré, J, et al., Maîtriser l'empreinte carbone de la France, Haut Conseil pour le Climat, 2020 (in French).
- Carbon footprint, Carbon Calculator, Carbon Footprint Calculator For Individuals And Households.
- Ecolab, Connaissez-vous votre empreinte sur le climat ?, Agence de la transition écologique (Ademe) et Betagouv (in French).

Selection of past articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- Income inequality impacts on the level of greenhouse gas emissions and on vulnerability to the consequences of climate change, 2020.
- Opinions: Combatting climate change in our daily life, 2020.
- Opinions: Condemned to utopia ? Climate and democracy: changing our paradigm to preserve the climate and our future, 2020.

- Climate : two complementary approaches for a better understanding of the greenhouse gases issue, 2019.
- Policies for a transition towards more sustainable and climate friendly food systems, 2018.
- Climate is changing – Food and Agriculture must too – Towards a “new food and agricultural revolution”, 2016.