



**By Arthur Lyon Dahl**

*"Why is the vast majority of the world's peoples sinking ever deeper into hunger and wretchedness when wealth on a scale undreamed of by the Pharaohs, the Caesars, or even the imperialist powers of the nineteenth century is at the disposal of the present arbiters of human affairs?"*

*The Promise of World Peace,  
Universal House of Justice*

Achieving sustainable consumption and true prosperity is one of the major environmental and social challenges of our time.

Consumption refers to our use of wealth, our use of materials, energy and services to meet our needs and desires. There is obviously a gradient in consumption, from the poverty of inadequate consumption to the abuses of over consumption. For something so relative, defining the parameters of the debate is not easy.

**The problem of consumption**

Why is consumption a problem? The human population has grown, and our technological capacity to produce and consume more has developed increasing per capita consumption. We have, therefore, begun to reach planetary limits, threatening Earth's natural resource base and ecological systems. We also have serious social problems due to the unjust distribution of wealth and consumption, threatening social sustainability.

Today, 1.3 billion people live in absolute poverty, and 900 million are hungry. The 910 million people in the OECD countries had an income per capita of \$20,250 in 1995, while the 4,770

million in the rest of the world earned an average of \$3,130 per person, with 19% hungry, 28% drinking polluted water and 29% illiterate.

Recent scenarios suggest some options for the world immediately ahead. If we continue with business as usual, they predict a homogenization of global culture based on values of individualism and materialism, the maintenance of significant income disparities (and thus extreme disparities in consumption), and a continuing degradation of the planet's environmental resource base and pollution assimilation capacity. Alternatives are described as increased barbarisation in a fortress world, or some transition to a transformed world of environmental and social sustainability.

# WHEN IS Sustainable Co

Excessive consumption could be described as a moral illness. The need for conspicuous consumption to demonstrate wealth, power and superiority becomes an emotional trap, and can even lead to diagnosed conditions such as compulsive shopping. In the USA, the automobile becomes an expression of one's personality and status, a cocoon to shield its occupants from unwanted encounters with other people, an element of individual security. The envelope of possessions and consumptive activities becomes a mask to hide an inner vacuum and vulnerability.

Consumption has also become a collective economic addiction. Growth is an absolute economic requirement, and any suggestion that growth might have a limit is unthinkable in economic circles. It is necessary to keep the economy turning to maintain employment and generate more wealth. When there was an economic down-turn in France a few years ago, the government called on its citizens to withdraw their savings and spend for the good of the economy. The expression: "when the going gets tough, the tough go shopping" epitomises the American way of life. Among the important dimensions of the problem of consumption are the extremes of wealth and poverty, the fact that some consume too much while others do not have enough.

It is estimated that the richest 20% of the world population consumes 80% of the world's resources. Global solidarity in this area is conspicuously lacking, and in many countries the extremes have widened over the last two decades. There is global competition for limited resources,

with the wealthy having the purchasing power to out-bid the poor even for essentials. This moral challenge will grow more extreme. One day if food shortages grow, the steak on your plate could mean several people starving to death.

Reducing excessive consumption does not necessarily have to mean a lower standard of living. Recent studies show that the Western lifestyle could be maintained with much greater efficiency in resource use. It should be technically possible to reduce energy and resource use by a factor of 4 in the short term, and of 10 in the longer term, to release resources for use in assisting development elsewhere. These goals have in fact been adopted by the most developed countries.

### **True prosperity**

In this context, it is worth asking if consumption brings prosperity. What is prosperity? Presumably it is an adequate amount of wealth. But this too is relative. There is an important cultural dimension to prosperity and the kinds of consumption used to signal prosperity.

For the French, food would be a preferred medium of expression; for the Americans an automobile; and for the Samoans a village church. Prosperity can be expressed at an individual level through personal consumption, and at a collective or community level through the provision of joint services or facilities. Either option can increase prosperity.

that the economic resources of the world should be organised, its sources of raw materials fully utilised, its available sources of energy exploited, its markets co-ordinated and the distribution of its products equitably regulated on a world basis. These may be functions of a future world federation. World intercommunications should be developed as the basis for a world civilisation uniting all peoples. These principles sketch out mechanisms to address the equity issues of sustainable consumption.

### **Implications of true prosperity and sustainable consumption**

This view of prosperity and consumption could have serious implications for the future of western

# ENOUGH, ENOUGH ?

## Consumption and True Prosperity

### **Sustainable consumption**

Sustainable consumption refers to the need to stay within the limits of the global sustainability of resources. It includes the concept of equitable sharing within and between generations. Consumption requires wealth, so the distribution of wealth is an important component of sustainable consumption, along with the total wealth of materials consumed.

Consumption changes in meaning and value along the spectrum from absolute poverty to great wealth. For the poor, consumption is a matter of survival, meeting basic needs for food, clean water, shelter, health, education, etc.

Along this spectrum, where is the borderline between "not enough" and "too much"? 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote in "The Secret of Divine Civilization", that "wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy."

In this sense, the amount of acceptable consumption is relative. Scientific or economic measures can define the consumption permitted by the amount of wealth available. It should also be possible to define "good" and "bad" kinds of consumption, with desirable consumption including knowledge, education, art and industry and all those things that contribute to the welfare of society.

Sustainable consumption is both an individual issue of what and how much a person consumes, and a collective issue of the sum total of consumption not exceeding sustainable limits.

A major issue is the excessive level of individual consumption in developed countries. It is worth re-examining the ethical basis for the "consumer society". Is prosperity material or spiritual, or some combination of both? What brings real happiness? Does it come from possessions, especially after basic needs have been met? Are possessions only one way to try to meet a more basic need for social acceptance, belonging and fitting in? Could happiness come from being of service, or being "rich in God"? The high consumption life-style may represent the pursuit of material happiness, but it can be very ephemeral. And how much is enough? Do we become the prisoner of our possessions? Are we trapped in the system? Should be busy ourselves with the things of this world? What is "necessary"?

These questions show how relative the concept of prosperity is, and the challenge that each individual faces in trying to define one's own concept of true prosperity.

### **Spiritual principles**

Ultimately questions of consumption come down to each person's definition of his or her purpose in life. If it is material, then material consumption becomes an important element. If it is spiritual, then the whole perspective changes. Some of the spiritual principles involved in addressing sustainable consumption include moderation, harmony of the material and spiritual, detachment, voluntary sharing and justice.

There are also resource issues that need to be addressed from a spiritual perspective. Maintaining the ecological balance of the planet is one of our responsibilities in our role as trustees of the world's resources. Justice requires

civilisation with its economic system built on endless consumption.

Imagine, for example, how much of the present economy would be lost if damaging, destructive or useless kinds of consumption were eliminated. This could include most military establishments and arms manufacture, industries supporting conspicuous consumption and luxury goods, most advertising and excessive "brand" competition and marketing gimmicks, commercial sports and some forms of entertainment, and such products as pornography, drugs, gambling, alcoholic beverages, tobacco and possibly even meat.

Such fields as agriculture, transport and urbanisation would need to be seriously modified. On the other hand, there would probably be an increase in communications, health, education, arts and culture, and even recreation.

Obviously the transition to a new society with different values will not be easy. It will require individual effort, rethinking the form and function of local communities, restructuring national economies, and effective mechanisms for global economic redistribution and resource management. All this is part of the challenge of building a future global society in which sustainable consumption leads to true prosperity.

*This article is based on a keynote address given by Dr Dahl to the 2nd Conference of the International Environment Forum, De Poort, The Netherlands in November 1998.*

*The views expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations Environment Programme.*