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Changing the System of Consumption and Production in the United States

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Focusing on the United States

The United States is well-known as one of the world's biggest consumers of natural resources and producers of waste, pollution, armaments, and advertising. The US is one of the wealthiest nations, yet among industrial countries it provides the lowest percentage of GDP in overseas development assistance. Much of our foreign assistance is military; the number one export is arms -- directed mostly to developing countries. At the United Nations, the US continues to be one of the biggest defaulters in dues; a fact of which the vast majority of the US public is completely unaware, believing instead that the UN is supported largely by the US.

Aside from news about such conflicts as Bosnia and Somalia, the US public knows very little about UN activities or US commitments at UN conferences. Only a minuscule percentage knows about *Agenda 21*, much less understands its significance to their children's future. While acts of terrorism and violence or celebrity scandals easily capture front-page headlines, the constructive efforts of NGOs and community organizations or even of national governments to avert the world's crises are rarely mentioned. Agreements reached or critical debates taking place at UN meetings such as the CSD or Habitat II aimed at averting global catastrophes are typically deemed "non-stories" and ignored by the news media. Even among the highly educated, most Americans are unfamiliar with the concepts of "sustainability" and "sustainable development."

While many US voters support environmental protection, as Congress recently discovered, this does not automatically translate into active support for sustainable consumption and production policies. Rather, public opinion on overconsumption (expenditures of which reached over \$4.6 trillion in 1994) remains mixed and the topic controversial. *Many Americans readily acknowledge our wasteful habits of consuming far more than we need, yet defend the individual freedom and right to do so.* While criticizing our materialistic values, the majority of Americans continue to perceive material wealth and expensive possessions as indicators of personal success and security. While there is a movement to reduce consumption, it is generally small and tends to emphasize voluntary simplicity and personal change rather than systemic change.

Most US politicians avoid the issue of overconsumption because it is a political quagmire. President Clinton has said, "I do not intend to ask the American people to lower their standard of living." The Clinton Administration, despite its claim as a leading advocate for sustainable development, remains painfully timid about overconsumption.

Who then will take the lead? What kind of strategies are necessary to reverse this situation?

Building a Movement to Change the System

Considering the above obstacles and many others not mentioned, what are the prospects and necessary strategy for changing the system of consumption and production now current in the United States? Clearly, *such a change can only be initiated from civil society, putting pressure on both government and business sectors to implement this change at local, national, and international levels.* While government and business may contain enlightened and well-intentioned individuals, the structures of government and business impose necessary constraints upon those individuals so that change is limited. For these individuals to be effective they need support from the outside. The efforts of green businesses and socially responsible investment are important, but insufficient to achieve systemic change.

Thus, without strong leadership from within government and business, *it is up to NGOs, CBOs, educators, labor unions, religious leaders, and concerned citizens to build a broad public base in support of sustainable consumption and production policies and practices.* As Yash Tandon points out, the objective is to do more than create green businesses or design more efficient technologies but to change the world's system of consumption and production. Ultimately, *this means building a broadbased social and political citizens movement for building just and sustainable communities and societies.*

Actions to Be Taken

NGOs and CBOs need to organize locally, nationally and internationally around a sustainability agenda that addresses the interdependence of environmental, social justice, women, human rights, peace and other critical issues. The struggle to change the system of consumption and production can be successful only through solidarity among NGOs committed to an evolving vision of a world of just and sustainable communities and societies.

IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE, we need to demonstrate to our politicians that there is a rapidly growing constituency among voters for a just and sustainable economy. *The goals of sustainable consumption and production must be translated into political terms, into a platform of issues articulated in local and national campaign language so that voters can clearly voice these priorities to electoral hopefuls and push them to commitments.* This constituency of voters needs to be built through active organizing, dialogue and education in every community across the country. Certain communities will take the lead and their example needs to be supported and promoted. To change priorities in Congress and the Administration we need to send new voices from around the country to Washington to get our message across. This effort will meet a strong opposition from the well-funded right wing, anti-environmental and religious fundamentalist coalition, as well as the more entrenched bureaucratic elements of government, and the

numerous political action committees populating Washington whose clients stand to lose from such a campaign. As with most political movements, these oppositional forces will need to be squarely faced with appropriate vision and tactics.

IN THE ECONOMIC SPHERE, businesses need to continue recognizing the growing movement among consumers to move away from products and services which deplete nonrenewable resources or add pollution and nonrecyclable waste. US industry and businesses need to feel a constant pressure to produce socially and environmentally responsible products and services. However, the greening of industry is not enough. *The economy itself requires transformation, drawing upon a reevaluation of old priorities, assumptions, measures of success, and the role of business in society and local communities.* In addition to readjusting production and investment patterns in line with environmental carrying capacity, a major objective of this transformation is eradication of the continually expanding extremes of wealth and poverty, both globally and within each country. Here Friends of the Earth's concept of *environmental space* offers a valuable tool. Another objective is reversing the trend towards economic globalization and the increasing dominance of transnational corporations. *The government's promotion of free trade must switch to fair trade. The policy of "enabling the market" must be redefined from the empowerment of large transnational corporations to the empowerment of consumers and small community-based producers.* Reversal of TNC dominance will only come about through an international alliance of local communities organizing around a social and environmental sustainability agenda.

IN THE CULTURAL SPHERE, the news media needs to be confronted with an audience demanding knowledge and information about the consequences of what they consume and produce, and for paths to a quality of life which leap far beyond the imagination of advertising agencies and market researchers. The cruel hoax perpetuated by the market system must be seen for what it is: attempting to sell material products as a replacement for community and spiritual needs. *The consumer culture must be replaced by an engaged civil society able and willing to take responsibility for setting a new direction for social evolution.* This means that educators, journalists, artists, and other citizens must move beyond the constraints of earning a living and take up the challenge of creating sustainable livelihoods and a living culture.

Elements of a US Sustainability Movement

Critiques of American consumer culture and the industries feeding it are not a new phenomena, with examples ranging from contemporary essays such as Alan Durning's *How Much is Enough?* (1992), Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin's *Your Money or Your Life* (1992), Paul Wachtel's *Poverty of Affluence* (1989), Duane Elgin's *Voluntary Simplicity* (1981), and Tibor Scitovsky's *The Joyless Economy* (1976), going back to discussions of conspicuous consumption raised by Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* in 1899. A strong case can also be made for the foundations of a sustainable consumption and production ethic rooted in traditions of both early Puritan colonists and the native American tribes occupying the continent for centuries previous.

The question is how to move from critique to action strategies, from status quo to social movement. In 1994, a year when US companies spent over \$150 billion in advertising

persuading the American public of the joys and existential necessity of buying and consuming, a small group of academics and activists came together to share ideas at the University of Maryland at a conference on "Consumption, Global Stewardship and the Good Life." While this conference tended to result more in ideas for journal articles than action strategies, it was followed by a second conference, "Redefining the American Dream," held the following year in Airlie, Virginia specifically to discuss "possible strategies for achieving sustainable consumption in the United States." Taking place the same time as international NGOs lobbied for sustainable consumption and production policy at the Third CSD meeting in New York, the American Dream conference set the foundation stones for a formal US network of environmental and social justice organizations and concerned individuals to discuss and promote sustainable consumption. The product of this conference, the **Center for a New American Dream** is scheduled to be launched later this year. The Center is expected to be a clearinghouse on sustainable consumption, a catalyst for campaigns on consumption, and a communicator with the media.

Although unable to match the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on marketing research each year, the Merck Family Fund commissioned a national survey, in connection with the American Dream conference, of Americans' attitudes about consumption and quality of life issues. One finding of this survey, the sense of the public's alarm about the future combined with ambivalence about what to do, indicates that *our political, economic, and communication strategies will need to be crafted with careful consideration of the public psychology and politics of language involved.*

Just as the advertising agencies manipulate people's personal fantasies and insecurities in order to sell products, the right wing coalitions are skillfully tapping people's prejudices and fears of immigrants, racial minorities, feminists, and the poor to gain political power -- in the name of traditional family values. Moving in the direction we have set for ourselves, we will need to leave the safety of familiar circles and enter new and dangerous battlefields occupied by passionate and well-funded opponents with allies at all levels of power and influence. We must come prepared with an understanding of what we are up against and a vision of what we need to create.

Another recent effort to advance a national sustainability agenda to change the current system, particularly through transformation of the country's many urban and rural communities, is the **US Network for Habitat II**. Mobilizing the involvement of US NGOs, CBOs, and local authorities around the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements taking place this June in Istanbul, the Network is catalyzing a national process of discussion, organizing and lobbying activities focused on the task of creating just and sustainable communities in the US and abroad. Guided by the principles of sustainability, equity, and civic engagement, the Network has been organizing a series of twelve "town meetings" in major cities and communities around the country. In addition, it is enabling the development of a national citizens statement and agenda (the most recent draft being *A Call for a Just and Sustainable America*) which includes promoting sustainable production and consumption and fair trade. With US presidential and congressional elections coming up in November 1996, the summer's Istanbul conference will serve as a springboard for advancing this sustainability agenda into the campaigns that will be taking place.

Internationally, the **Sustainable Societies Initiative**, which includes many NGOs from the US as well as those from other northern and southern regions, is also at work within the Habitat II process, coordinating a dialogue and networking process around the draft document *Towards an International Agenda on Building Sustainable Communities and Sustainable Societies*. In the Habitat process, the Sustainable Societies Caucus has been one of the few groups actively lobbying for sustainable consumption and production language in the Habitat *Global Plan of Action*. With the CSD meetings coming up in April, the Caucus hopes to forge linkages between NGO effort to promote local Agenda 21 plans and NGOs working to promote sustainable human settlements policies. Ultimately, the Sustainable Societies Initiative aims to promote dialogue and solidarity among NGOs committed to sustainability agendas locally, nationally, and internationally. As expressed in their UN lobbying activities, participants in the Initiative have put changing the system of consumption and production at the center of their sustainability agendas.

At the upcoming CSD meeting this April, the US government will present its recently released report from the **President's Council for Sustainable Development**, an effort involving heads of the key federal agencies, corporate CEOs, and environmental and community leaders across the country to recommend to the President "a national strategy for sustainable development." The report, *Sustainable America: A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity, and a Healthy Environment for the Future*, is now available to the public, after over two years and much anticipation among the hundreds of people who contributed ideas and experiences. For many people, particularly those involved in the various working groups which contributed their ideas, analyses, and experience into the process, the report evokes mixed feelings. On the one hand, they are grateful to see elements of the sustainability agenda given this spotlight, along with many important policy recommendations (e.g., on extended product responsibility, tax shifts and subsidy reform, education for sustainability, full-cost accounting, environmental justice policies, etc.) The PCSD, in its determination to bring together environmentalists and corporate leaders to the same table, has served the function of advancing the national dialogue on sustainability, the result of which will in the long term be determined by how much the American public understands and appreciates. Ultimately, the public needs to become engaged and the PCSD process has helped move the country a step closer towards this engagement.

On the other hand, behind much of the language on environmental protection and stewardship lies the familiar obsession with economic growth, free trade, and the nationalistic desire to enhance the United States' "global competitiveness" -- priorities leaving many environmentalists and fair trade advocates skeptical if not thoroughly frustrated. Furthermore, many advocates for sustainable consumption and production policies perceive the PCSD report as timidly avoiding the debate on these issues, hiding behind the concepts of "technological progress," voluntary "changes in lifestyles," and "managing population growth." Although the report points out that "understanding and addressing the unsustainable aspects of the nation's production and consumption patterns are essential," it sidesteps the political-economic double-bind into which the Clinton Administration and American society have become locked. No mention is made of the huge annual expenditures and investment of human and technological resources by the advertising and marketing industries to increase per capita consumption of cars and gasoline,

new fashions and furniture, fast foods and soft drinks, and so on, not to mention the continued production and sales of military products. Consider President Clinton's economic report to Congress in February 1995, in which he stressed that "Our efforts to prepare the American people to compete and win in the new global economy cannot succeed unless we succeed in expanding trade and boosting exports of American products and services to the rest of the world."

To change the system of consumption and production in the United States there must be a broad-based social movement in local communities throughout the nation, linked in solidarity with communities in the developing and industrial countries with which our fate is intertwined. This movement must be actively nurtured and promoted by local, national and international civil society organizations, demonstrating to both liberal and conservative politicians as well as corporate executives that a powerful constituency for sustainability exists and is growing. In the 1996 Presidential and Congressional campaigns now gathering momentum, on the shopfloors and in the boardrooms of American businesses, in community meeting halls and churches, and in the private households of citizens throughout the country, we must position these issues -- ultimately, the issue of what kind of society we are creating -- at the center of attention.