State of the World 2013

IS SUSTAINABILITY *Still Possible?*

THE WORLDWATCH INSTITUTE

CHAPTER 10

Re-engineering Cultures to Create a Sustainable Civilization

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At the heart of how humans live their lives are the cultures they are part of. These cultures—and the norms, stories, rituals, values, symbols, and traditions that they incorporate—guide nearly all of our choices, from what we eat and how we raise our children to how we work, move, play, and celebrate. Unfortunately, consumerism—a cultural pattern that was nurtured by a nexus of business and government leaders over the past few centuries—has now spread around the globe, becoming the dominant paradigm across most cultures. More people are defining themselves first and foremost through how they consume and are striving to own or use ever more stuff, whether in fashion, food, travel, electronics, or countless other products and services.[1]

But consumerism is not a viable cultural paradigm on a planet whose systems are deeply stressed and that is currently home to 7 billion people, let alone on a planet of 8–10.6 billion people, the population the United Nations projects for 2050. Ultimately, to create a sustainable human civilization—one that can thrive for millennia without degrading the planet on which we all depend—consumer cultures will have to be re-engineered into cultures of sustainability, so that living sustainably feels as natural as living as a consumer does today.[2]

Granted, this is no easy task. It will and is being resisted by myriad interests that have a huge stake in sustaining the global consumer culture—from the fossil fuel industry and big agribusiness to food processors, car manufacturers, advertisers, and so on. But given that consumerism and the consumption patterns it fuels are not compatible with the flourishing of a living planetary system, either we find ways to wrestle our cultural patterns out of the grip of those with a vested interest in maintaining consumerism or Earth's ecosystems decline and bring down the consumer culture for the vast majority of humanity in a much crueler way.

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Consuming the Planet

In 2008, people around the world used 68 billion tons of materials, including metals and minerals, fossil fuels, and biomass. That is an average of 10 tons per person—or 27 kilograms each and every day. That same year, humanity used the biocapacity of 1.5 planets, consuming far beyond what the Earth can sustainably provide.[3]

Of course, not every human consumes at the same level. While the average Southeast Asian used 3.3 tons of materials in 2008, the average North American used 27.5 tons—eight times as much. And the spread of consumerism has driven many regions to dramatically accelerate material consumption. Asia used 21.1 billion tons of materials in 2008, up 450 percent from the 4.7 billion tons that the region used in 1980.[4]

This vast differentiation in consumption is often explained as simply a difference in development levels—with growth in consumption trends routinely celebrated by leading newspapers, policymakers, and economists, regardless of the current size of the host economy. In reality, however, such high levels of consumption often undermine the well-being of high-income consumers themselves, while also deeply undermining humanity's long-term well-being and security.

The United States, for example, now suffers from an obesity epidemic in which two thirds of Americans are overweight or obese. This leads to significant increases in mortality and morbidity from a variety of chronic, diet-related diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and several forms of cancer. Worse, obesity has reached a point that it is affecting children and even shortening the average American life span, not to mention costing the United States $270 billion a year in additional health care costs and lost productivity.[5]

Beyond the personal impact, this obesity epidemic—which has spread around the world, with 1.9 billion people now overweight or obese globally and suffering similar health impacts—adds significantly to the demands humanity puts on Earth. Obesity has added an extra 5.4 percent of human biomass to the planet—15.5 million tons of human flesh—which means that people are eating enough extra food each year to feed an additional 242 million people of healthy weight. And obesity is just one manifestation of the ills of overconsumption, to which we could add urban sprawl, traffic, air pollution from automobiles and factories, and dependence on a growing number of pharmaceutical drugs like anti-depressants.[6]

Consuming at such high levels is depleting the capacity of Earth to provide vital ecosystem services—from a stable climate, due to the profligate use of fossil fuels and consumption of meat, to provision of freshwater and fish, through pollution by chemicals and plastics. And as high consump-

tion levels are promoted as ways to increase well-being, development, and economic growth, these pressures only increase. Indeed, if all humans consumed like Americans, the earth could sustain only about one quarter of the human population without undermining the planet's biocapacity. But even if everyone only consumed like the average Chinese, the planet could sustain just 84 percent of today's population.[7]

Why are people consuming so much? The answer cannot be simply because they can afford to. In short, it stems from decades of engineering of a set of cultural norms, values, traditions, symbols, and stories that make it feel natural to consume ever larger amounts—of food, of energy, of stuff. Policymakers changed laws, marketers and the media cultivated desire, businesses created and aggressively pushed new products, and over time "consumers" deeply internalized this new way of living.[8]

In a majority of societies today, consumerism feels so natural that it is hard to even imagine a different cultural model. Certain goods and services—from air conditioning and large homes to cars, vacation travel, and pets—are seen as a right, even an entitlement. Yet it is these and countless other lifestyle choices that in the aggregate are undermining the well-being of countless humans, today and for centuries into the future.[9]

Moving away from consumerism—now propped up by more than $500 billion in annual advertising expenditures, by hundreds of billions of dollars in government subsidies and tax breaks, billions more in lobbying and public relations spending, and the momentum of generations of living the consumer dream—will undoubtedly be the most difficult part of the transition to a sustainable society. Especially if, as analysts predict, an additional 1 billion consumers join the global consumer class by 2025.[10]

But ultimately consumerism will decline whether people act proactively or not, as human society has far transcended Earth's limits. Our profligate use of fossil fuels has all but guaranteed an increase in average global temperatures of 2 degrees Celsius, and current projections suggest that unless a dramatic shift in policies and behaviors occurs, an increase of 4 degrees Celsius or more by the end of this century, or even mid-century, is possible.[11]

These vast climatic changes will bring unprecedented heat waves, megastorms, massive droughts, dramatic floods, population displacements, and the deaths of tens, even hundreds of millions of people—not to mention political instability. (See Chapter 31.) None of these are conducive to the perpetuation of a global consumer culture, though surely a small elite will still be able to maintain the materialistic version of "the good life." Ideally, however, we will not accept this as our likely future but instead will grapple with the main challenge of our times: re-engineering human cultures to be inherently sustainable. (See Box 10–1.)[12]

Box 10–1. What Would a Culture of Sustainability Look Like?

When discussing the transition beyond consumerism, opponents often conjure up a return to hunting and gathering and living in caves. In reality, if proactive—that is, if we do not wait until Earth's systems are irrevocably degraded—humanity can maintain a decent quality of life for all (and not just current consumers) at a much lower level of impact.

Roland Stulz and Tanja Lütolf of Novatlantis looked at what an equitable and sustainable consumption level would look like. They found that from an energy perspective—with a commitment to move to a sustainable energy paradigm based on renewables (admittedly a big qualifier)—the average human could continuously use 2,000 watts of energy (or 17,520 kilowatt-hours per year) for all of his or her needs, including, food, transportation, water, services, and possessions.

This is the current global average energy use—but it is unequally divided, with people in industrial countries using far more, such as in the United States, which uses six times this amount per person. What does living off this amount of energy look like?

One Australian researcher and inventor, Saul Griffith, analyzed a 2,000-watt lifestyle at a personal level and found that he would need to own one tenth as much stuff and make it last 10 times as long, that he would have to fly rarely, drive infrequently (and mostly in efficient vehicles fully loaded with passengers), and become six-sevenths vegetarian.

Put simply, a 2,000-watt lifestyle looks like the way much of the world lives today, or better, but gone are the celebrated entitlements of the high-income lifestyle—79 kilograms of meat a year (2.5 servings a day), nearly daily access to a private car (often with only one passenger), air-conditioned homes, family pets, and unfettered access to flights around the world. In truth, these luxuries will no longer be routinely accessible to the vast majority of people in a truly sustainable society, though they may be available as rarer treats, like the once-every-three-years flight to visit his parents that Saul Griffith factored in to his new energy allowance.

Sometimes these lost consumer luxuries will be difficult sacrifices to accept after a lifetime with free access to them, though rarer consumption of luxuries may actually make them more enjoyable, like escaping to a cool café on a very hot day or enjoying meat on special occasions. But offsetting these lost consumer luxuries will in all likelihood be improved health, more free time, less stress, a strengthening of community ties (as people rely on each other instead of on privatized services), and—most important—a stop to the decline of major ecosystems on which a stable human civilization depends.

Source: See endnote 12.

Learning from Past Greatness

Keep in mind that cultures are always changing in large ways and small—sometimes organically and other times intentionally with a push in certain directions, whether driven by religious, political, technological, or other forces. There have been many spectacular beneficial cultural shifts in recent history: slavery was abolished in the United States, apartheid disappeared in South Africa, women have equal representation in many societies, fascism was defeated in Western Europe. Of course, some of these shifts required military power, not just "people power," and none of the victories is guaranteed to stay with us indefinitely without vigilance. But perhaps the biggest cultural transformation of all—one often overlooked but in reality one to draw inspiration from—was the initial engineering of consumerism.

At first there was resistance to the introduction of some elements of

consumerism. For example, the first generation of factory workers typically chose to work fewer hours when receiving raises, not buy more stuff. The purpose of life, after all, was not to spend most of a person's waking hours in hot, dangerous conditions, away from family and community. This resistance could be seen over and over: to disposable goods that were introduced in the 1950s, which went against the cultural norm of thrift that had been so important to family survival; even to the switch from oil lamps to gas lights, which to some seemed unnaturally bright and "glaring." But over time people got used to new products, some of which did indeed improve life quality and many of which were at least marketed as such by clever entrepreneurs and a new advertising industry. Eventually we could hardly imagine life without an abundance of products. Three sectors deserve special recognition for so effectively shifting (and continuing to shift) cultural norms around transportation, food, and even relationships—and in turn, even if unintentionally, helping to engineer a global consumer culture.[13]

The automobile industry offers an excellent case study on how to change cultural norms. Car companies used nearly every societal institution to shift transportation norms and even our understanding of the street, which before cars came along was understood as multimodal—shared by humans, horses, carts, and trolleys. A combination of tactics shifted this norm.

Automobile companies bought up city trolley systems and dismantled them. They distributed propaganda (disguised as safety educational materials) in schools, teaching children from an early age that the street was built for cars, not them. Companies helped create and finance citizen groups to oppose people who were concerned with the spread of cars and the accidents they were causing. They even helped local police forces fine, arrest, or shame pedestrians who crossed streets wherever they wanted to (known today as "jaywalkers"—a word that was intentionally spread by car companies and their allies), helping to further establish the car as the dominant user of streets. And of course they spent huge sums marketing cars as sexy, fun, and liberating. Today the car industry spends $31 billion a year just in the United States on advertising and has effectively exported car culture to developing countries—like China, where the automobile fleet has grown from less than 10 million to 73 million in just 11 years—using lessons learned in earlier successes.[14]

The fast-food industry provides another good example. Serving over 69 million people around the world every day, McDonald's is a global power. So it may come as a surprise that less than a century ago the hamburger—today's iconic American meal—was a taboo food, unsafe, unclean, and eaten only by the poor. But technological changes, including the assembly line and the automobile, helped make the conditions right for a transformation in how we eat: quickly, on the go, and out of the home. McDonald's not only

seized on this, it accelerated the transformation, retraining the palates of entire generations of Americans and now the 119 countries in which the company operates.[15]

McDonald's did not just create a cheap and tasty food, it effectively targeted children to get them to eat at McDonald's early on—shaping their palate for both the company's food and the high-sugar, high-salt, high-fat consumer diet. McDonald's was one of the earliest companies to market to children. It created cartoon characters to appeal to kids, including the globally recognized clown, Ronald McDonald. The company built playgrounds in its restaurants and offered toys in its kids' meals to get children excited to go to McDonald's (and to pressure their parents to bring them), even before they had acquired a taste for the food. Add to that the more than $2 billion in global advertising the company spends each year, and the sheer economic and political power today to keep its prices low (through lobbying and commodity purchasing power), and you have a powerful shaper of cultural and dietary norms that has a global and even generational reach.[16]

The third relevant case study is the pet industry. In India, dog ownership has grown significantly in recent years. In part this has been driven by demographic changes that include later marriages and increasing social isolation, but the obvious solution to this did not have to be pet ownership. Yet a global pet industry, recognizing an opportunity to grow, worked to stoke this enormous potential new market. It is part of the larger industry effort to transform pets into family members so that more people will buy pets and that owners will spend more on them (which industry and many owners call their "children").[17]

And it has worked. People spend more than $58 billion on pet food each year around the world. Americans spend another $11.8 billion on pet supplies annually—with nearly $2 billion of that on just cat litter, adding up to billions of pounds of litter annually diverted to landfills—and $13.4 billion on veterinarian care that is often more sophisticated than most humans have access to. Considering the ecological impact of the millions of dogs and cats (133 million dogs and 162 million cats in just the top five dog- and cat-owning countries in the world), this is not just another curious consumer trend. Two German Shepherds have a larger ecological footprint from their food requirements alone than a person in Bangladesh does in total. And unfortunately it is Bangladeshis—whose country is one of the most vulnerable to climate change—not wealthier people's pets, who will bear the brunt of climate change.[18]

These products and countless others—from doughnuts to disposable diapers—are all being spread to new consumer populations, supported by $16,000 of advertising every single second somewhere in the world. So how do we transform the world's cultures so that living sustainably becomes as

natural as living as a consumer has been made to feel today? Just as consumer interests learned over the decades as they worked to stimulate markets and, intentionally or inadvertently, engineer cultural norms, it will be essential to use the full complement of societal institutions to shift cultural norms—business, media and marketing, government, education, social movements, even traditions.[19]

First Attempts to Pioneer Cultures of Sustainability

While consumerism is being spread more aggressively every year, many cultural pioneers are working to spread a culture of sustainability, in both bold and subtle ways, locally and globally, and often in ways they may not even recognize as culture changing. The most effective of these pioneers tend to use dominant societal institutions to normalize an alternative set of practices, values, beliefs, stories, and symbols.[20]

Within the business sector, a handful of executives are using their companies to transform broader consumption norms. The clothing company Patagonia, for instance, recognizing that its continued success depends on the earth and that "the environmental cost of everything we make is astonishing," has taken the bold step of encouraging its customers to not even buy its products unless truly needed, encouraging them to instead either buy used Patagonia products or do without. The company even worked with eBay to create a ready supply of used Patagonia gear.[21]

While some change will be driven by large corporations—which have significant capital and influence at their disposal—the real drivers of a culture of sustainability in the business sector are entrepreneurs and business leaders working to transform the sector's mission altogether, with a positive social purpose being first and foremost and with revenue generation simply being the means to achieve that. The good news is that an increasing number of business leaders, when creating new businesses, are establishing these "social enterprises" with the specific goal of using their businesses, and the profits they generate, to improve society. In Thailand, the restaurant Cabbages & Condoms has for decades helped to normalize safe sex to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies—using a clever mix of décor, events, and information. It donates its profits to the Population and Community Development Association (its parent organization) to promote family planning projects in Thai communities.[22]

And today, more social enterprises like these are flourishing and even locking their beneficial missions directly into their corporate charters. Many businesses are now incorporating or getting certified as "B" or "benefit" corporations. Twelve states in the United States have set up laws that allow businesses to incorporate as benefit corporations, which requires them to work toward having an overall positive effect on society and the

environment. And the company must take into account the impact of its decisions on not just shareholders but all stakeholders, including workers, local communities, and the planet. Where laws do not allow incorporation as a benefit corporation, many businesses have worked with B Lab, a nonprofit organization, to be certified as B corporations. As of fall 2012, there were 650 certified B corporations in 18 countries and 60 industries, with annual revenues of more than $4.2 billion.[23]

Within government, more policymakers are recognizing the need to use this institution to help steer citizens toward consuming less and living more sustainably, editing out unsustainable options like supersized sodas in New York City and plastic bags in San Francisco. (See Box 10–2.) And some are supporting sustainable choices like mass transit, bicycle lanes, even super accessible libraries, as with the series of library kiosks that Madrid placed in its subway system.[24]

A few governments are starting to lead even bolder transformations—such as expanding fundamental rights to the planet itself. Just as the introduction of human rights transformed the legal realm and was a catalyst for social change around the world, Earth's rights could have the same potential. In recent years, Ecuador and Bolivia have both incorporated Earth's rights into their constitutions, in turn empowering people to legally defend Earth's interest even when no humans are directly harmed—for example, by stopping mining projects in an uninhabited area.[25]

Beyond governance, local communities are organizing themselves to both reinforce sustainability norms locally and inspire others to do the same. There are now hundreds of ecovillages around the world modeling sustainable and low-consumption lifestyles. And hundreds of Transition Towns are working to transform existing communities to be both more sustainable and more resilient. While all these efforts are small in scale and scope, their potential to inspire and experiment with new cultural norms is exponentially larger.[26]

A number of schools and universities are also working to embed sustainability directly into their school cultures, including integrating environmental science, media literacy, and critical thinking into their curricula. In Europe, 39,500 schools have now been awarded a "Green Flag" for greening their curricula, empowering students to make their schools more sustainable, and articulating the schools' ecological values alongside their educational values. Some schools are also modeling a sustainable way of living, from integrating gardening programs and renewable energy production onto school grounds to changing what is served in the cafeteria. In Rome, a leader in school food reform, two thirds of food served in cafeterias is organic, one quarter is locally sourced, and 14 percent is certified Fair Trade.[27]

Like education, cultural and religious traditions play a central role in

Box 10–2. Shifting Norms with Choice Editing

On September 13, 2012, after months of debate, stacks of scientific reports, several City Hall press events, and a $1-million counter-campaign by the soda industry, the New York City Board of Health banned the sale of large cups of sodas and other sugary drinks. For Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the ban was the "the single biggest step any city has taken to curb obesity." But some people are not so sure. Fearing that the ban will spread to other cities (Richmond, California, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, are considering similar action), the soda industry promises to fight on. Many New Yorkers are also skeptical—60 percent view the ban as infringing on their consumer freedom. And yet the science is clear: large portion sizes, defined as 32 ounces or more for soda and sugary drinks, increase consumption, often beyond the point of any additional satisfaction, and are a major driver of the obesity crisis.

With this ban, Mayor Bloomberg joins the swelling ranks of policymakers, scientists, public interest groups, and communities that are re-engineering the norms of consumerism through a frontal assault on the fabric of choice. Colleges and universities are removing trays from their cafeterias, making it more difficult for students to pile on food as they move down the line. This simple "choice edit" has reduced food waste by 30 percent on many campuses. A plastic bag tax in Washington, DC, and a ban in San Francisco have produced striking reductions in plastic-bag pollution; more important, it has begun to foster a culture of reuse (in this case, of cloth shopping bags) that could spill over into other consumer venues.

The construction of bicycle superhighways in Denmark and the focus on better bike paths, joined with financial incentives to bicycle to work in the United States, promise to make the choice of riding a bike over driving a car more attractive. And communities like Albert Lea in Minnesota are enjoying better health, longer life spans, and greater happiness by subtly changing everything from the size of plates in restaurants and the choice of snacks in vending machines to the configuration of sidewalks and the availability of walking paths.

Successful choice editors tend to focus on small aspects of choice that produce big outcomes, like the food trays in cafeterias or the 5¢-per-bag tax in Washington. They foster choices that clearly deliver benefits to health and happiness. They also strive to preserve choice, or at least the illusion of choice. The ban on incandescent lightbulbs soon to take effect in the United States will succeed in part because of the expanding choice of acceptable lighting alternatives. The best choice editors, moreover, resist reacting too quickly to initial public objections to choice edits. They know that people frequently become habituated to their new choices and forget their initial objections.

Scores of choice-editing strategies for sustainability are hiding in plain sight. They remain largely untapped in part because of qualms about the manipulative quality of choice editing. It is easy to forget, though, that existing patterns of choice are often no less manipulative than the more-sustainable patterns that choice editors advocate. After all, 32-ounce drink cups were created to drive consumers to buy more, while the lack of good sidewalks and bicycle paths subtly but firmly pushed people to motorized transport. Reconfiguring cultural norms will mean, in part, overcoming the aversion to choice editing while simultaneously engaging the public in a conversation about the growing costs of a consumer society.

—Michael Maniates
Professor, Allegheny College
Source: See endnote 24.

shaping our understandings of the world. Fortunately, more religious communities are drawing attention to practices and teachings that reinforce our sustainable stewardship of Creation. These initiatives include everything from promoting carbon fasts for Lent to reclaiming *shemitah*—the seven-year sabbath cycle in Judaism—to encourage sustainability. Perhaps most

important is the greening of life's rites of passages—births, coming-of-age celebrations, weddings, and funerals—which, while infrequent, have disproportionate impacts both on the planet and on shaping cultural norms.[28]

In many cultures, funeral traditions reinforce an idea that humans are separate from nature, with humans being embalmed and hermetically sealed in coffins to delay the decaying process. If, on the other hand, funerals celebrated our return to the natural cycle of life and reinforced our place as part of a larger living Earth system, this ritual could play an important role in nurturing a culture of sustainability. Instead, the current form uses significant ecological resources. In the United States, 3.1 million liters of embalming fluid, 1.5 million tons of concrete, 90,000 tons of steel, and more than 45 million board feet of lumber are used each year in burials, costing the average family about $10,000, often a significant financial burden at a distressing time. Groups like The Green Burial Council are helping to shift this tradition, promoting natural burial—free of chemicals and of expensive coffins or vaults and in natural cemeteries that provide parkland for people to enjoy, space for biodiversity, and trees to absorb carbon dioxide.[29]

Storytelling and myth building also have tremendous potential to help transform cultures, from efforts like Big History, which is working to incorporate sustainability into cultural creation stories (see Chapter 20), to a plethora of documentaries and films that wrestle with sustainability themes. Two examples are worth noting for their similarity: the documentary *Crude* and the blockbuster science-fiction film *Avatar*. These films, each produced in 2009, are essentially the same story, both about indigenous peoples fighting to protect their land from those pursuing the resource wealth underneath. *Avatar*—with its global reach and $2.8 billion in sales so far—in particular has the potential to deeply shift beliefs and raise awareness that our current consumptive path will lead to the future of Earth described by the protagonist Jake Sully in the final moments of the film: "There's no green there. They killed their Mother."[30]

Finally, given that media—and the marketing now embedded at its every level—play such a powerful role in shaping modern cultures, social marketing and "ad jamming" will be a powerful means to harness marketing energy for positive ends. Examples include social marketing efforts like The Story of Stuff project, which uses short, catchy videos to build political support for reduced consumption (see Chapter 23), and ad jamming efforts by Adbusters, the Billboard Liberation Front, and The Yes Men. The Yes Men, for example, uses fake ads and press conferences to draw attention to hypocritical positions of businesses and global institutions, such as their subversive effort to pose as Dow Chemical representatives and announce that the company would pay reparations for the 1984 Bhopal disaster (leading to a stock

plunge of 4.2 percent in 23 minutes and the company's temporary loss of $2 billion in market value) and their efforts to jam the multimillion-dollar "We Agree" advertising campaign by the oil company Chevron. With few resources—leveraged in aikido-like fashion—these efforts garner significant

Chevron

Chevron ad from its "We Agree" advertising campaign.

jonathan mcintosh

Spoof ad of Chevron's "We Agree" advertising campaign, Inspired by The Yes Men's ad jamming campaign, by Jonathan McIntosh.

attention and undermine the public relations efforts of those spending millions on advertising to shape the public's view of the company, their products, and, more generally, progress.[31]

Just as water can erode rock into a grand canyon, the continuing pursuit of culture-changing efforts can add up to much more than their constituent parts. And the seeds that pioneers like these sow today, even if they fail to take root while consumerism is dominant, may sprout as humanity desperately reaches for a new set of norms, symbols, rituals, and stories to rebuild a semblance of normality once Earth's systems unravel under the unbearable burden of sustaining a global consumer economy.

Tilting at Cultural Norms?

When the dominant institutions of most societies are primarily still promoting consumerism, and probably will not stop anytime soon, how will upstart efforts to engineer cultures of sustainability have any chance of success? Ultimately, if Don Quixote had just waited long enough, the passage of time would have brought down his windmill giants. The same is true for the consumer culture giants, which depend completely on the bounty of the energy embedded in fossil fuels, abundant resources, and a stable planetary system provided to humanity at this stage in its development. (See Box 10–3.)[32]

But given Earth's weakening capacity to absorb greenhouse gases and other wastes generated in pursuit of the consumer dream, the end of the consumer culture will come—willingly or unwillingly, proactively chosen or not—and sooner than we would like to believe. The only question is whether we greet it with a series of alternative ways of orienting our lives and our cultures to maintain a good life, even as we consume much less. Every culture-changing effort, whether small or large, will help facilitate this transition and lay the foundation for a new set of cultural norms—quite possibly only implemented when humanity has no other choice.

While some will argue until the bitter end that letting go of certain consumer luxuries is a step backwards, as North Face apparel company cofounder and environmentalist Doug Tompkins notes, "What happens if you get to the cliff and you take one step forward or you do a 180-degree turn and take one step forward? Which way are you going? Which is progress?" Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard answered that the solution for a lot of the world's problems may be "to turn around and take a forward step. You can't just keep trying to make a flawed system work."[33]

The challenge will be convincing more individuals that further efforts to spread a consumer culture are truly a step in the wrong direction and that the faster we use our talents and energies to promote a culture of sustainability, the better off all of humanity will be.

Box 10–3. Development and Decline

Since 1990, *development* has been added to the rubbish heap of dismantled ideas in history. The development age lasted 40 years, from President Truman's announced intention at the onset of the Cold War to raise the living standards of poor nations through to the Washington Consensus in 1989 that paved the way for the end of Keynesianism and the ascent of market fundamentalism.

The epoch of development was then replaced by the age of globalization. It was not the nation-state developing but the purchasing power of consumer classes worldwide. Cold War divisions faded away, corporations relocated freely across borders, politicians and many others pinned their hopes on the model of a western-style consumer economy. In a rapid—even meteoric—advance, a number of newly industrializing countries acquired a larger share of economic activity. For them, it was as if President Truman's promise—that poor nations would catch up with the rich—had finally come true. But this success was paid for by destruction of local and global ecosystems. Development-as-growth turns out to be mortally dangerous.

Since the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2007, the age of security is on the rise. States line up to bolster the failing confidence of the economy, and in turn the economy burdens the state with an insurmountable pile of debt. The newcomers are preoccupied with the fossil and biotic raw materials needed for growth: the resource imperialism of China, India, and Brazil is similar to that of the rich countries, albeit in fast motion. Above all, the age of security is an era when human security of the poor and powerless is being violated on a large scale. Freeways cut through neighborhoods, high-rise buildings displace traditional housing, dams drive tribal groups from their homelands, trawlers marginalize local fishers, supermarkets undercut small shopkeepers. As development proceeds, the land and the living spaces of indigenous peoples, small farmers, and the urban poor are put under ever more pressure.

Economic growth is of a cannibalistic nature; it feeds on both nature and communities, and shifts unpaid costs back onto them as well. The shiny side of development is often accompanied by a dark side of displacement and dispossession; this is why economic growth has time and again produced impoverishment next to enrichment.

In hindsight, the consumptive Euro-Atlantic development path turns out to be a special case; it cannot be repeated everywhere and at any time. Access to biotic resources from colonies and fossil raw materials from the crust of the earth were essential to the rise of the Euro-Atlantic civilization. There would have been no industrial or consumer society without the mobilization of resources from both the expanse of geographical space and the depth of geological time. Climate chaos as well as the limits to growth suggest that the past 200 years of Euro-Atlantic development will remain a parenthesis in world history.

Indeed, it is difficult to see how, for example, the automobile society, chemical agriculture, or a meat-based food system could be spread completely across the globe. In other words, pursuing the resource-intensive Euro-Atlantic model requires social exclusion by its very structure; it is unfit to underpin equity on a global scale. Development-as-growth cannot continue to be a guiding concept of international politics unless global apartheid is taken for granted. Politics, therefore, is at a crossroads. The choice is for either affluence with persistent disparity or moderation with prospects for equity. If there is to be some kind of prosperity for all world citizens, the Euro-Atlantic model needs to be superseded, making room for ways of living, producing, and consuming that leave only a light footprint on the earth.

—Wolfgang Sachs
Senior Fellow, Wuppertal Institute
Source: See endnote 32.

15. Andre Dierderen, *Global Resource Depletion: Managed Austerity and the Elements of Hope* (Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers, 2010), p. 53.

16. Sandu and Syed, op. cit. note 10.

17. Gavin M. Mudd, Zhehan Weng, and Simon M. Jowitt, " A Detailed Assessment of Global Cu Resource Trends and Endowments," *Economic Geology*, forthcoming.

18. Cutler J. Cleveland, "Net Energy from Extraction of Oil and Gas in the United States," *Energy*, April 2005.

19. Carey W. King and Charles A. S. Hall, "Relating Financial and Energy Return on Investment," *Sustainability*, vol. 3, no. 10 (2011), pp. 1,810–32.

20. Dobbs, Oppenheim, and Thompson, op. cit. note 8.

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