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Time Running Out to Ensure Sustainable Prosperity for All

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Worldwatch's State of the World 2012 maps out a new vision of the good life but cautions that accelerating ecological shifts will make this difficult to attain.
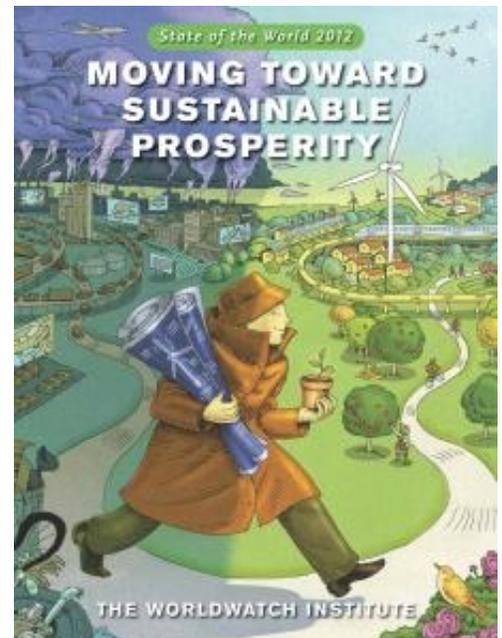Wednesday, April 4th, 2012
Korea IT Times (info@koreaittimes.com) [4]
WASHINGTON,D.C, USA – Over the last 50 years, the world's middle and upper classes have more than doubled their consumption levels, and an additional 1 to 2 billion people globally aspire to join the consumer class. The planet cannot maintain such increases in resource demand without serious consequences for both people and ecosystems, concludes the Worldwatch Institute in State of the World 2012: Moving Toward Sustainable Prosperity. The book, the 29th in a series that Worldwatch began in 1984, stresses that we must act quickly to redefine our understanding of the "good life" and redouble our efforts to make that life sustainable.

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"The Industrial Revolution gave birth to an economic growth model rooted in structures, behaviors, and activities that are patently unsustainable," says Worldwatch Senior Researcher Michael Renner, co-director of State of the World 2012. "Mounting ecosystem stress and resource pressures are accompanied by increased economic volatility, growing inequality, and social vulnerability.It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the economy no longer works for either people or the planet."

Instead, we need to reprioritize basic needs and pursue true sustainable prosperity: development that allows all human beings to live with their fundamental needs met, with their dignity acknowledged, and with abundant opportunity to pursue lives of satisfaction and happiness, all without risk of denying others in the present and the future the ability to do the same. This, in turn, means not just preventing further degradation of Earth's systems, but actively restoring them to full health.

With the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development taking place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June, this is the year to catalyze a move toward sustainable prosperity. The gathering, more commonly known as Rio+20 for its commemoration of the anniversary of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, offers a chance to set the course for an economic system that promotes the health of both people and ecosystems. The themes for Rio+20 are: 1) a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, and 2) an institutional framework for sustainable development.

"We are cautiously optimistic about the upcoming Rio conference," says Erik Assadourian, a senior fellow at Worldwatch and co-director of State of the World 2012. "But minor shifts in policy and technology will not be enough to save humanity. Rio+20 participants should re-consider the vision that guides their deliberations. If we do not radically change our consumer culture and collectively re-prioritize sustainable living, we will be the agents of our own undoing."

The aspirations of the original 1992 meeting in Rio collided with a set of painfully sobering developments, including unfriendly politics, orthodox economics, and a dominant culture of consumerism. The 20 years since then have made it clear that necessary change is not merely technical, but encompasses changes in lifestyle, culture, and politics.

The report's 35 contributors describe many of the currently untenable social and economic patterns and explore opportunities for creative alternatives on sustainability topics ranging from agriculture, communication technologies, and biodiversity to "green" construction, local politics, and global governance. Specific topics include:

• A Green Economy that Works for Everyone: For industrial, emerging, and developing countries, a green economy will mean different things. But they have in common the need to create green jobs that offer a decent living, and they all can benefit from policy innovations such as a network of cooperative green innovation centers, a standard-setting global "top runner" program, green financing and skills training, and greater economic democracy.

• Degrowth in Overdeveloped Countries: Humanity uses 1.5 Earths' worth of ecological capacity, with much of that consumed by overdeveloped industrial countries. Sustainable prosperity will require economic degrowth in these countries. This can be achieved by a mix of tax shifting, shortening work weeks, denormalizing certain types of consumption, and de-marketizing certain sectors of the economy, such as food production and child care.

• Inclusive and Sustainable Urban Development: Urban poverty is pervasive, and absolute numbers are expanding in both the developed and developing worlds: some 828 million people live in slums worldwide. Urban planning needs to include strategies such as explicit and transparent spatial plans, democratic engagement of the poor and community-based organizations, and coordination across sectors, especially affordable housing, transportation, and economic development.

• Sustainable Transportation: Today there are nearly 800 million cars on the world's roads, and in the developing world transportation is the source of up to 80 percent of harmful air pollutants. A sustainable and socially progressive alternative requires a shift toward denser cities that generally require less motorized travel, invest in high-quality transit, and support vibrant, healthy

communities by enabling walking and cycling.

• Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs): More than half of the world's population lives in cities, and 90 percent of urbanization is occurring in the developing world. ICTs can help cities become safer, cleaner, and more sustainable places to live, but they are currently underutilized in both the developed and developing worlds. Reversing this trend must go beyond the current public-private partnerships and "smart cities" projects by providing broad public access to data and boosting public involvement.

• Measuring Sustainable Urban Development: Since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, there has been limited progress in developing a universal sustainability indicator system that is scientifically valid and credible. This has been true in the United States as well, but efforts are under way to develop a database of indicators that will inform discussions at Rio+20 about how to measure urban sustainability.

• Reinventing the Corporation: Transnational corporations (TNCs) have evolved over the past five centuries into globally influential entities. They often go unchecked, with no limits placed on their impacts on society, the environment, or the economy. TNCs must adapt if sustainability is to become a reality, including shifts in their purpose, ownership, capital investment, and governance.

• The Global Architecture of Sustainable Governance: Sustainability efforts worldwide will be shaped by the reforms being discussed for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). If UNEP is going to play a valuable and productive role in these efforts, it must enjoy increased authority and financial resources, but above all it must be better connected to other international agencies so it can play the coordinating and visionary role its founders had in mind.

• Population Growth Strategies: In 2011, global population passed the 7 billion mark, and confronting population growth is critical to the future sustainability of the planet. Over time, population growth will end and reverse with no need for "population control" through assuring reproductive health and rights for all, adequate education for girls and boys, and equal economic activity for both sexes with internalization of the environmental costs of economic activity.

• Sustainable Buildings: The construction and operation of buildings use 25-40 percent of all produced energy, accounting for a comparable share of global carbon dioxide emissions. We must aim for the goals of net zero energy use, zero emissions, and zero waste if new construction and existing buildings are going to be sustainable.

• Public Policy and Sustainable Consumption: Combating the rise of consumerism will require government involvement, including advertisement management, tax modification to include the true cost of a product or service, and the establishment of sustainability certification programs.

• Mobilizing the Business Community: Our current economic model does not consider planetary limits, is socially exclusive, and places private interests above public ones. A recipe for a successful 21st-century economy needs to be green, inclusive, and responsible, which will take a combination of business-led voluntary initiatives reinforced by new corporate structures and strong government policy and public oversight.

• Sustainable Agriculture: Almost 2 billion people are fed by produce from the 500 million small farms in developing countries. Yet these small-scale producers are some of the most food-insecure people: 80 percent of the world's hungry live in rural areas. To optimize the productivity and environmental sustainability of small farms, future agricultural policy must combine a rights-based approach with legislation that is localized and culturally specific.

• Food Security and Equity: In recent decades, factory farming has increased meat, egg, and dairy consumption worldwide, particularly in the developing world. But this industrial meat production system has been harmful to human health and the environment. The internalization of costs, restoration of ecosystems, and education of the public----among other strategies----can help create a new food system that is more efficient, equitable, and climate-compatible.

• Biodiversity: The rate at which species are becoming extinct is estimated to be up to 1,000 times higher today than in pre-industrial times. Efforts such as the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services are needed to better understand and reverse the erosion of nature's resiliency.

• Valuation of Ecosystem Services: The human ecological footprint has grown so large that progress is now constrained more by limits on natural resources and ecosystem services than by limits on infrastructure or technology. Ecosystem services help evaluate the benefits derived from ecosystems by assigning a monetary or physical unit to those benefits, which can in turn help to better facilitate natural resource management.

• Local Governance: Decisions at the local level can be the greatest catalysts for progress because they contribute directly to poverty reduction, job growth, gender equity, and environmental protection. As a result, the development of local democratic procedures that are transparent and reliable is critical to global sustainable development.

"There won't be much point in revisiting the Rio+20 conference in another 20 years to try to figure out what went wrong," says Worldwatch President Robert Engelman. "We know enough right now about the state of the world to see clearly that we have to change the way we live and the way we do business. Working out new paths towards true sustainability will take much more than a conference of governments, though such a gathering can help. The task begins with the recognition that perpetual economic and demographic growth aren't possible on a finite planet. We can work with the hope that ecological stability is possible, along with a good life based on health, literacy, strong communities, and access to 'enough' rather than ever more."

The State of the World 2012 report is accompanied by other informational materials including policy briefs, videos, and a discussion guide, all of which are available a www.sustainableprosperity.org [6]. The project's findings are being disseminated to a wide range of stakeholders, including government ministries, Rio+20 participants, community networks, business leaders, and the nongovernmental environmental and development communities.

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