

STATE OF THE WORLD 2012

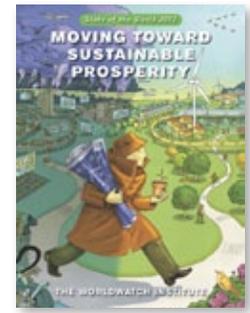
Moving Toward Sustainable Prosperity

POLICY BRIEFS

Chapter 11

Public Policies on More-Sustainable Consumption

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KEY MESSAGES

- ▶ A growing middle class in developing countries is increasing its consumption level to mirror that of industrial countries, which are unsustainable.
- ▶ Companies, consumers, and governments all play integral parts in modifying current consumption habits to make them more sustainable.
- ▶ An active civil society, especially one equipped with online tools, can play a key role in promoting change.

THE PROBLEM

Consumer culture is growing among the aspiring middle class in various countries. This group now seeks to purchase goods and services that go beyond meeting basic needs, such as computers, beauty products, and decorative home improvements. Such changes show that the middle class aims to mirror the habits of the richer socioeconomic classes, whose consumption levels greatly surpass the threshold of sustainability. These habits are promoted by the influence of mass media and huge advertising budgets, which help to ingrain a growing consumer culture.

Many consumers generally want companies to behave in a more environmentally friendly manner, but pushing for corporate reforms can be difficult. In a 2011 Nielsen survey, only 22 percent of respondents stated that they would be willing to pay more money for products that are more environmentally friendly. This shows that the rise in the drive to consume is not matched by increasing concerns about sustainability.

MOVING FORWARD

Because it has become ingrained in many societies, combating a rise in consumerism requires a wide array of actions. Governments in particular must play a strong role in introducing initiatives such as the following:

- ▶ *Modify taxes so that they reflect the true value of a product or service.* Governments can promote products and services that are more sustainable by lowering the taxes on them. Additionally, they should raise taxes on things that are less sustainable, steering demand away from such products. By including the external costs of these products, such as pollution, customers can realize the true costs of them and adjust their purchasing choices.
- ▶ *Manage advertisements.* Because young people can be easily influenced, governments should reassess rules regarding advertising aimed at children and youth. If societies put in place stricter controls on ads seen by children, children will have a better chance to grow up with more sustainable patterns of consumption. Additionally, governments should monitor claims made in advertisements regarding the qualities and sustainable aspects of products, and put limits on how much advertising populations are exposed to more broadly, such as the city of São Paulo, Brazil, did when banning outdoor advertising.



McDonald's Restaurant after ban on outdoor advertising took effect in São Paulo, Brazil.



Billboard Liberation Front

McDonald's billboard before and after being "jammed" by Billboard Liberation Front activists.

- ▶ *Partner with organizations to establish certification programs.* Governments should work with industries and civil society organizations to develop frameworks for certifications on sustainability. This would encourage companies to provide more information on the life-cycle of their products in order to participate in the programs. Additionally, increased exposure could influence companies to modify their business practices and product developments in an effort to attain higher levels of sustainability certification. Such a program would also allow customers to make better purchasing choices more easily.
- ▶ *Mobilize civil society to help corporations behave more responsibly.* Civil society also plays a key role in getting corporations to understand the need for change. Nongovernmental organizations and pressure groups have been challenging everyday social norms—whether through local efforts like purchasing cooperatives, efforts to encourage less consumption through campaigns like Meatless Mondays, efforts to “jam” corporate advertisements to sell consumers unhealthy products, or

campaigns to put direct pressure on corporations to change their practices. The Rainforest Action Network, for example, mobilized thousands of activists to pressure Home Depot into using more sustainable forest products. Continued and varying efforts by civil society groups to both collaborate with corporations and pressure them to become more sustainable and responsible is essential.

LOOKING AHEAD

Material goods and consumption habits tend to become increasingly significant as a society becomes wealthier. Reforming consumption behavior requires changing a very important part of a society's culture, and the influence of media and corporate advertising poses a serious challenge to such initiatives. Transformation of the consumption mentality of a society will take time, but if governments, civil society organizations, and corporations build collaborative partnerships, progress toward more-sustainable consumption is possible.

This brief is based on Chapter 11, “Public Policies on More-Sustainable Consumption,” by Helio Mattar, published in Worldwatch Institute's *State of the World 2012: Moving Toward Sustainable Prosperity*.

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