

CONSUMPTION PATTERNS OF THE NORTH - THE CAUSE OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION AND POVERTY IN THE SOUTH

By Maria Mies

The biggest problems the world is facing today, ecological destruction, hunger and poverty in the "Third World" and the danger of war, are an outcome of the prevailing development model of unlimited growth of goods and services, of money revenue, of technological progress and of a concept of well-being, identified as an abundance of industrially produced commodities. The **Limits of Growth** and the **Global 2000 Report to the President** show that this

model, which prevails in the affluent countries of the North, cannot be generalized to the rest of the world. And yet, UN commissions like the Brandt Commission and the Brundtland Commission describe the problems more or less adequately, but do not analyze them as a direct outcome of the growth model called industrialism or market economy, nor is there an effort to change this paradigm. An effort is made, instead, to remedy the disasters produced by this model by the means of this model.

When the Brundtland Commission introduced the concept "sustainable development" many people thought, that now, at last, the growth mania of the industrial system, its basic philosophy, would be openly criticized and abandoned. But when one reads the

report "Our Common Future" more closely, it becomes evident that the authors do not dare to take such a bold step. They do not propose a new economic philosophy as the framework for a concept of economic, social and ecological sustainability. The Brundtland Commission defines "sustainable development" as "development





Photo: F. Botts

that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations”, but as a solution to the global problems, the Commission proposes more global economic growth:

“If large parts of the developing world are to avert economic, social and environmental catastrophes, it is essential that global economic growth be revitalized... this means more rapid economic growth in both industrial and developing countries, free market access for the products of developing countries, lower interest rates, greater technology transfer and significantly larger capital flows, both concessional and commercial.”

This insistence on further, more rapid, global economic growth, both in the industrial and the poor countries, is evidence that the authors are not ready to see the connection between growth on one side and improv-

erishment on the other, between progress and regression, between development and de-development or underdevelopment. They are still wedded to the linear, evolutionist philosophy of unlimited resources, unlimited progress, and unlimited earth and to an economic paradigm of “catching up development.” This means the rich industrial nations of the North (North America, Europe, Japan) remain the image of the future for the poor countries of the South. “Global economic growth” is seen as the engine that will bring them up to the same standard of living, the same consumption patterns which prevail in the North.

The First Global Revolution, published by the Club of Rome in 1991, is even more explicit in describing the global ills of our planet and time: that the affluent societies of the industrialized North are consuming the bulk of the world’s resources, particularly

energy. Whereas before the Industrial Revolution the per capita consumption was more or less the same in the North and the South, the per capita consumption of energy and resources in the North is now 40 times that of the South. These societies produce about 80 per cent of the CO₂ emissions and an increasing amount of waste, including toxic waste. The Club of Rome points out that the concept of “sustainable development,” so optimistically proposed by the Brundtland Commission, is incompatible with the rate of growth in the industrialized countries, suggested by the Commission. In other words, the stimulation of permanent economic growth cannot be reconciled with a concern for conservation of scarce resources and a sustainable ecology and society. The present level of consumption, prevailing in the affluent countries of the North, cannot be generalized. The authors ask: Is the present level of material wealth in the rich industrialized countries compatible with sustainable global development? They admit that, sooner or later, governments will have to address the question of consumption. “We believe that consumption cannot survive in the present form, not only with respect to objective reasons, but even more so with respect to human values”.

But does this all amount to a radical critique of the basic philosophy of the market economy and its dogma of growth? One paragraph further we read:

"Here it should be emphasized that we are not in favour of zero-growth. According to our conviction it is indispensable to promote economic growth in the South, while the industrialized North, on the road to the postindustrial society rather needs qualitative growth."

This means, growth, permanent economic growth must be growth of quantitative material commodities in the South and of qualitative non-material commodities in the North. As the northern markets for durable consumer goods are largely saturated, new markets have to be created for non-material goods. Does this not amount to the same philosophy of "catching up development?"

THE LIMITS OF GROWTH AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF CATCHING-UP DEVELOPMENT

The resource base within our limited globe is limited and the

economic philosophy of unlimited growth of goods and services, and hence money revenue, will necessarily reach the ecological limits of this planet. And yet, practically all conceptions and strategies of development, both national and international ones, are explicitly or implicitly based on the assumption that the poor nations will eventually reach the standard of living of the USA or Europe.

However, if we keep in mind that the 6 percent of the world's population who live in the USA annually use up 30 percent of the fossil energy produced, then it should be clear, that the rest of the world's population, of which about 75-80 percent live in the poor countries of the South, cannot also consume as much energy per person. (*Global 2000*). The people living in the rich industrialized countries - USA, Europe and Japan - who make up only one quarter of the world's population, consume three quarters of the world's energy production. The

world's population could be estimated at eleven billion by the year 2050. If these eleven billion people had a per capita energy consumption typical of Americans in the mid-seventies, conventional oil resources would be exhausted with four years. All energy resources would last only 34-74 years. (T. F. Trainer, *Development to Death: Rethinking Third World Development*, 1989).

Even if the world's resource base was not limited, it would take about 500 years for the poor countries to reach the standard of living prevailing in the rich countries of the North. And this would only be possible if the rich countries did not continue with this growth model. To catch up with this model of development is practically impossible for the poor countries of the South. It is not only impossible because of the limits of the resource base and the uneven distribution of their consumption. It is above all impossible because the growth model in the rich industrialized countries is based on a colonial world order in which the gap between the two poles is getting wider and wider, at least as far as economic development is concerned. The world is polarizing. The living standards in the rich countries of the North would not be so high if the colonized South had not been exploited and if this exploitation were not continuing. If all labor incorporated in the commodities sold in the rich countries was paid at the rates of a skilled male worker of Germany then most of these

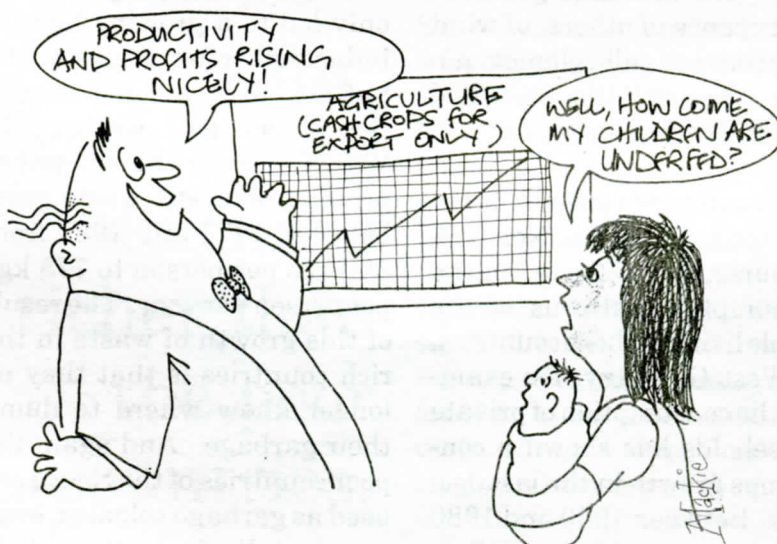




Photo: ILO

commodities would be so expensive that only a small minority could buy them. So-called development is not an evolutionary process from a lower to a higher stage but a polarizing process in which some are getting richer and richer because they make other poorer and poorer. Two hundred years ago the Western world was only five times as rich as the poor countries of today. In 1960 this relationship was already 20:1, and in 1983 it was 46:1, the rich countries being 46 times richer than the poor countries. The wealth in the rich countries grows ever

faster, and within a limited world this means it grows at the expense of others, of what I continue to call colonies: nature, women, the so-called Third World.

This continuous growth in the rich countries of the North is, of course, also reflected in the consumption patterns of the people living in these countries. In West Germany, for example, the consumption of private households has shown a continuous growth in the last decades. Between 1950 and 1980 private consumption grew five-fold. This continuous growth

of private consumption was accompanied by a change in the consumption patterns. Whereas around 1950 almost half of the expenses were spent on food, this proportion was only 23 percent in 1987. A much greater part of the income of private households could now be spent on leisure time activities and luxury items. There are, of course, also differences in this consumption patterns between lower and higher income groups, but compared to the poor countries in the world even these were relatively better off. Even the low income households spent 10.2 percent of their expenditure on leisure-time goods and activities. (Gisela Dorr and Karin Prinz, **Entwicklungstendenzen des Konsums privater Haushalte**, 1990).

The industrial growth model also produces ever increasing amounts of wastes of toxic garbage, destroys the ozone-layer and produces the hot-house effect. The continuous growth in the rich countries has not only led to a growing heap of industrial - often toxic - waste, but also to increasing quantities of domestic wastes. In West Germany the amount of private, domestic waste grew between 1971 and 1982 from 350 kgs per person to 775 kgs per person per year. The result of this growth of waste in the rich countries is that they no longer know where to dump their garbage. And again the poor countries of the South are used as garbage colonies, even or especially for toxic waste.

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These examples and figures show that "catching up development" is not possible for the poor countries and that a conception like sustainable development for all is not compatible with a growth-oriented industrial world market system. This system is simply not sustainable. And it is not generalizable. Someone said that we would need two more planets if we want to try to generalize the living standard and consumption patterns of the rich countries to all people living in the world: one planet to get the necessary raw materials and the other planet to dump out waste.

The continuation of the industrial growth model will not only lead to further ecological destruction but also to more inequality, to more poverty. And this will affect women and children first.

If we aim for sustainability, we must transcend the industrial, world market and profit-oriented growth model. This transcendence is, as Vandana Shiva has convincingly shown in her book *Staying Alive*, for the poor, for women and children in the poor countries and regions a matter of survival. They fight explicitly against "development" and modernization because they know that this development will destroy their survival base, their access to the commons: land, water, air, forests, their communities, their culture. They are the ones who have to pay the price for urban and male development.

"CATCHING-UP DEVELOPMENT" IS NOT DESIRABLE

Yet, if one tries to forget all considerations of equity and all ecological concerns one may ask whether this model of good life, pursued by the societies in the North, this paradigm of "catching-up-development" has at least made people in the North happy. Has it in fact fulfilled its promises there? Has it at least made women and children there more equal, more free, more happy? Has their quality of life improved while the GDP grew?

We read daily about an increase of homelessness, of poverty, particularly of women and children, or rising criminality in the big cities, of growing drug addiction and other addictions, including the addiction to shopping. Depression and suicides are on the increase in many of the affluent societies. Direct violence against women and children seems to be growing, both violence in public as well as domestic violence and sexual abuse. The media are full of all forms of violence. Apart from this, the urban centers are suffocating from car exhausts. There is hardly any free space left for people to walk and breathe, the cities and highways are packed with cars. Whenever they can, people try to run away from these urban centers and seek relief in the countryside or in the poor South. If the quality of life is so good, then why do people not stay in the

cities during their vacations? It has been found that the quality of life in the USA is today lower than what it was ten years ago. There seems to be an inverse relationship between the GDP and the quality of life: the more the GDP grows, the more the quality of life deteriorates. One example: growing market forces have led to the fact that food, which used to be prepared at home, is now increasingly bought in fast-food restaurants. Preparation of food has become a service, a commodity. If more and more people buy this commodity, the GDP grows. What also grows at the same time is the erosion of community, the isolation and loneliness of individuals, the indifference and atomization of the society.

With the growing number of ecological catastrophes, some man-made like the Gulf War or Chernobyl, material life deteriorates in the rich centers of the worlds.. The affluent society is a society, which in the midst of plenty of commodities, lacks the fundamental necessities of life: clean air, unpoisoned water, healthy food, space, time, quiet. This scarcity of basic common necessities for survival not only affects those who are poor but also the rich, although the poor are affected more.

The prevailing world market system, oriented towards unending growth and profit, cannot be maintained unless it can exploit external and internal colonies: nature, women

and other countries. But it also needs people as buyers who never say: IT IS ENOUGH. The consumer model of the rich countries cannot be generalized to the rest of the world, but it is not even desirable for the minority of the world's population who live in the affluent societies. Moreover, it will lead increasingly to wars about the ever scarcer resources. The Gulf War was also a war about the control of oil resources in that region. If we want to avoid such wars in future the only alternative is a deliberate and drastic change of lifestyle, a change of consumption quantities and consumer patterns in the affluent societies of the North, a deliberate and broad movement towards energy conservation.



Photo: I. Velez

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VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY AND CONSUMER LIBERATION

The transcendence of the capitalist, patriarchal growth-economy model should start in the rich industrial countries. It is not acceptable to have two different sets of goals for the rich and the poor countries, or, for that matter, for men and women. As the path of "catching up development" is neither possible for all, nor desirable, the only solution to this dilemma is a voluntary reduction of the living standard and a change of consumer patterns in the rich countries and classes. If sustainability is a good thing for people living in the poor countries then it must also be a good thing for people living in the rich countries. A double standard is ethically not acceptable. We cannot preach to the people in Brazil not to destroy their rainforest while we in the rich countries continue to destroy the world's climate by an ever growing car industry and private transport system.

Many people have understood the necessity of this change of lifestyle. But usually they leave the responsibility for change to the politicians, to the governments. In democratic societies, however, the politicians are not better or wiser than their constituency. They will not introduce unpopular measures unless people are prepared to go along with them. Therefore the first policy recommendation of such a consumer lib-

eration movement is that it has to start from below, from the consumers themselves. Only when considerable numbers of people are prepared to change their lifestyles and to adopt different values than those of competitive consumption will the politicians and the entrepreneurs follow them.

Such a change of consumption patterns and of lifestyles will only occur in the rich countries and classes when people begin to realize that less is more, when they begin to define what constitutes a good life differently from what the managers of the corporations think. This new definition of "good life" will emphasize different values which in our consumer societies are underdeveloped or even destroyed like: self-sufficiency, cooperation with other people and nature instead of competitiveness, respect for all creatures on earth and their diversity, belief in the subjectivity not only of human beings but also of non-human beings, communality instead of "catching up with the Joneses" (particularly responsible for most of superfluous consumption in our societies) satisfaction and joy in one's work, happiness instead of standard of living, joy of life that springs from cooperation with others and an understanding of the meaningfulness of what one does. All these values can be brought to life if consumer liberation is correctly understood as a liberation and not only as a loss or an ascetic exercise. The aim of consumer liberation is an improvement of the quality of life.

The need for such improvement is felt by many people in the affluent societies although they may not yet see a clear connection between consumerism and deterioration of the quality of life - or see the possibility to change this.

A different definition of the "good life" and an improvement of the quality of life implies different forms of satisfaction of fundamental human needs. Max-Neef and his colleagues, who developed this concept of fundamental human needs in the workshop on Human Scale Development for Latin America, stresses that fundamental human needs are universal, but that their satisfiers, the means and ways by which these needs are satisfied, may vary according to culture, region, historical conditions. In capitalist industrial societies goods, commodities have become the determinant satisfiers. Max-Neef and his colleagues identified nine fundamental human needs: Subsistence (health, food shelter, clothing, etc.), Protection (care, solidarity, work, etc.), Affection (self-esteem, love, care, solidarity, etc.), Understanding (study, learning, analysis, etc.), Participation (responsibilities, sharing of rights and duties), Idleness (curiosity, imagination, games, relaxation, fun), Creation (intuition, imagination, work, curiosity, etc.), Identity (sense of belonging, differentiation, self-esteem), Freedom (autonomy, self-esteem, self-determination, equality).

As these fundamental human needs are universal, they are the same in rich and poor, "overdeveloped" and "underdeveloped" countries. In overdeveloped or industrial societies these needs are satisfied almost exclusively by satisfiers which have to be bought in the market, which are produced industrially, and which not only very often are pseudo-satisfiers, because they do not in the end satisfy the need - like cars which are bought for status purposes - or cosmetics, which are bought to satisfy the need for love, they are sometimes simply destructive. The arms race, e.g., is legitimized by the need for Protection, the need for Subsistence, the need for Freedom.

Consumer liberation and a change of lifestyle would mean that people begin to chose different satisfiers, which, as far as possible, are neither pseudo-satisfiers nor destructive ones, satisfiers which do not involve a further deterioration of the relationship between human beings and the ecology, which do not deteriorate further the existing patriarchal relationship between men and women, which do not put into jeopardy the living conditions of future generations, which do not enhance dependency, but promote self-reliance.

If we try to break out of the mental framework which industrial society has created and which it has exported to all poor countries we discover that there would be many different ways, many of them not de-

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pendent on the market, to satisfy those fundamental needs. Take the need for affection. Many women in the affluent societies try to satisfy their need for affection and recognition by going on a shopping spree. Many buy clothes to satisfy this need. They hope that by following the latest fashion they will win the affection of their partners, of their surroundings in general. The self-esteem of women in our societies is closely linked to their outward appearance. We also know that in spite of these efforts at compensatory consumption, this need for affection and self-esteem is never satisfied by buying new clothes. They are pseudo-satisfiers. The women compensate for a deep human need by buying a commodity. Within a consumer liberation movement one would have to find or invent new ways, particularly non-commoditized ways, to satisfy this need for affection. This could mean for children, for example, that one would spend more time with them or play with them instead of buying them ever more toys. Many of the non-commoditized satisfiers have the advantage of being synergetic. This means they satisfy not only one need but several at the time. If one takes time to play with children a number of needs are satisfied: the need for affection, for protection, for understanding, for idleness, freedom, identity. And this applies both to the children and to the grownups. If fundamental human needs are satisfied in non-commercial ways - I call

them subsistence ways - then these processes of satisfaction are often reciprocal ones. The one who gives something also receives something. A mother who breastfeeds her baby gives something and gets something. If such a change of lifestyle occurred in the rich countries on a big scale this would not only halt the destruction of the ecology and stop the exploitation of the "Third World," it would also change the model for imitative and compensatory consumption which middle class people in the North provide both for the lower classes in their own country and for people of the South. A practical critique of this model, coming from the affluent societies themselves is necessary if we want to break the fascination of "catching up development" and imitative consumption, because patterns of consumption of the North are imported into countries of the South and are imitated by political and economic power groups there. These consumption patterns then lead to more dependency, indebtedness, internal imbalances and a loss of cultural identity. Max-Neef and his colleagues stress the need to break away from these imitative consumption patterns in the "Third World" in order to free these countries from economic and cultural dependence and to make a more efficient use of their own resources for their own well-being. It is a necessary step for "Third World" countries towards self-reliance. In my view, however, a breaking away from the imposed consumption pat-

terns is also a necessary step towards a self-reliance of hitherto overdeveloped, affluent societies. Most of these depend, as we saw, to a very large extent on the exploitation of the "Third World" countries and their resources. If sustainability and self-reliance are considered the correct path for countries of the South, then they must necessarily also be the correct path for the North.

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