# Can Sustainable Consumers and Producers Save the Planet?

*Mohan Munasinghe*

Household consumption drives modern economies, but unsustainable consumption, production, and resource exploitation have led to multiple crises that threaten the future survival of humanity. Climate change is now considered the ultimate threat multiplier that will exacerbate the formidable problems of development we already face—such as poverty, hunger, illness, water and energy scarcities, and conflict.

*Anthropogenic carbon emissions exemplify modern resource overexploitation. The consumption of 1.2 billion richer humans accounts for some 75% of total emissions. Instead of viewing these consumers as part of the problem, we should persuade them to contribute to the solution.*

The world is facing economic, social, and environmental risks, best characterized by a "bubble" metaphor based on greed and false expectations, whereby a few enjoy immediate gains and the vast, unsuspecting majority will pay huge future costs. These threats may interact catastrophically unless they are addressed urgently and in an integrated fashion.

## Economic, Social, and Environmental Bubbles

First, the ongoing economic recession was caused by the collapse of a greed-driven asset bubble that inflated financial values well beyond the true value of underlying economic resources. These "toxic" assets are estimated at about $100 trillion (twice the annual global gross domestic product [GDP]).

Second, a social bubble based on poverty and inequity is developing despite economic growth; billions of poor people are excluded from access to productive resources and basic necessities, such as food, water, and energy. Currently, 1.2 billion people in the top 20th percentile of the world's population by income consume almost 85% of global output, or 60 times more than the poorest 20th percentile. Poverty is being exacerbated by the economic recession, worsening unemployment, and reduced access to survival needs.

Finally, humankind faces the bubble of environmental harm and resource shortages, due to myopic economic activities that severely degrade natural assets (air, land, and water) on which human well-being ultimately depends. Climate change is just one grim global manifestation of this threat, and, ironically, the worst impacts will fall on the poor, who are not responsible for the problem.

Unfortunately, human responses to these issues are uncoordinated and inadequate. Governments have quickly found more than $4 trillion dollars for stimulus packages to revive shaky economies. Meanwhile, only about $100 billion


DOI: 10.1111/j.1530-9290.2009.00215.x

Volume 14, Number 1

per year is devoted to alleviating poverty, and far less is directed to combating climate change. The recession is further dampening enthusiasm to address the more serious long-term poverty and climate issues.

Clearly, world leaders lost a major opportunity to allocate a much larger share of the stimulus packages to green investments, sustainable livelihoods, education and health, and safety nets for the poor, instead of mainly propping up banks and promoting unsustainable consumption. We should now seek to recoup the momentum for longer-term change by promoting sustainable consumption.

## Key Role of Sustainable Consumption and Production

Anthropogenic carbon emissions exemplify modern resource overexploitation. The consumption of 1.2 billion richer humans accounts for some 75% of total emissions. Instead of viewing these consumers as part of the problem, we should persuade them to contribute to the solution. A recent report (Munasinghe et al. 2009) shows how to mobilize the power of sustainable consumers and producers.

Making consumption patterns more sustainable will reduce carbon emissions significantly (e.g., using energy-saving light bulbs, washing laundry at lower temperatures, eating less meat, planting trees, or using fuel efficient cars). Such actions not only save money but are also faster and more achievable than many so-called big technology solutions. Furthermore, families who purchase low-carbon products and services can stimulate innovation in businesses while encouraging politicians to take radical steps toward a lower carbon world. Many existing "best" practice examples can be replicated widely, and innovative businesses are already developing the future "next" practice products and services.

A "virtuous cycle" of mutually supportive sustainable consumption and production can cut across national boundaries and interests. It will complement the traditional top-down emphasis on action by governments that lack political will to take bold steps. Finally, the rich must not only help the many billions of poor to emerge from poverty but also set a better example that will encourage the latter to seek more sustainable consumption paths.

A Sustainable Consumption Institute launch meeting in October 2009, including political leaders, business leaders from the Consumer Goods Forum (an organization representing companies with an annual turnover that collectively approaches $1 trillion), and top academics, endorsed the report's findings. They pledged to overcome barriers faced by consumers, including the availability and affordability of low-carbon products, lack of information, and a sense of hopelessness. This was a welcome contrast to the continuing reluctance of world leaders to boldly address climate change issues at the Copenhagen summit.

## Sustainomics

The sustainomics framework (Munasinghe 2009), originally proposed at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, provides four core principles that underpin this novel approach to addressing climate change and sustainable development problems together.

- First, making development more sustainable (MDMS) becomes the main goal. This is a step-by-step method that empowers people to take immediate action. It is practical because many unsustainable activities are easy to recognize and eliminate. The sustainable consumption—production path epitomizes this approach.
- Second, the three key dimensions of the sustainable development triangle (economic, social, and environmental) must be given balanced treatment. Consumers need simplified and relevant information on these three aspects to make sustainable choices, through pricing, advertising, labeling, and the media.
- Third, our thinking should transcend traditional boundaries. It is essential to replace unsustainable values, such as greed, with sound moral principles, especially among the young. People must be made aware that problems such as climate change span the whole planet, play out over centuries, and concern every human being on earth.

Stakeholders need to work together to meet the common threat—more than ever, government needs the support of civil society and business. Transdisciplinary analysis will help producers find innovative solutions that cut across conventional disciplines. SCP requires such a revolution in thinking and behavior.

- Finally, full life cycle analysis that uses integrated tools is required. In particular, producers need to reexamine the entire value chain, from raw material extraction to consumer end use and disposal, from the economic, social, and environmental perspectives. This will help identify weak areas where innovation can improve production sustainability, reform pricing, and yield accurate labeling information (e.g., carbon footprint). The principles of industrial ecology would help to minimize both resource inputs and waste outputs.

## Concluding Ideas

Ordinary citizens and businesses are often ahead of political leaders in terms of willingness to address climate change and sustainable development issues. Given the many existing best practice examples, we do not need to wait for new technologies, laws, or infrastructure. Consumers can be encouraged to behave more sustainably without lowering their quality of life.

All human beings are stakeholders when it comes to sustainable development and climate change. Consumers and producers can and must strive to make development more sustainable—economically, socially, and environmentally. By acting together now, we will make the planet a better and safer place for our children and grandchildren.

## References

Munasinghe, M. 2009. *Sustainable development in practice: Sustainomics framework and applications*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Munasinghe, M., P. Dasgupta, D. Southerton, A. Bows, and A. McMeekin. 2009. *Consumers, business and climate change*. Manchester, UK: Sustainable Consumption Institute, University of Manchester. www.sci.manchester.ac.uk/. Accessed December 2009.

## About the Author

**Mohan Munasinghe** is director general of the Sustainable Consumption Institute at the University of Manchester, in Manchester, United Kingdom; chairman of the Munasinghe Institute of Development (MIND), in Colombo, Sri Lanka; and co-winner of the 2007 Nobel Prize for Peace (vice chair, IPCC-AR4).

**Address correspondence to:**
Mohan Munasinghe
Munasinghe Institute for Development (MIND)
10/1 De Fonseka Place, Colombo 5,
SRI LANKA.
mohan@mindlanka.org
www.mindlanka.org