EDITORIAL

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Millennium consumption goals: a fair proposal from the poor to the rich

Introduction

In preparation for another Earth Summit in 2012, Professor Mohan Munasinghe, a former vice-chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, has proposed establishing the Millennium Consumption Goals (MCGs) for the rich on the planet. This proposition has already gained considerable international support and the MCG Initiative is now gathering momentum in the United Nations and at many subsidiary levels (i.e., country, city, community, enterprise, and even individual) and is being pursued by a broad network of stakeholders from civil society, business, academia, and government.

The proposal states that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were formulated by the United Nations on behalf of the poor and the MCGs would constitute a complementary process to facilitate sustainable development on Earth. The imminent failure of the MDGs in terms of poverty eradication might prompt some to question the value of the MCGs. At the same time, prior efforts to voluntarily regulate the behavior of the overconsuming 20% of the planet’s population have not been successful and the MCGs will require serious political willpower and an international mandate to succeed. From another perspective, the MCGs may provide impetus to the MDGs by focusing on managing the consumption patterns of the rich, who continue to deprive the poor of consumption opportunities. In this context, the focus of the MCGs should be not only to shift the consumption of the rich toward sustainability, but also to ensure that the poor have adequate consumption opportunities and the growing consumer classes in the developing nations adopt more sustainable modes of consumption.

The MCG Proposal

The MCG proposal was officially presented during the first intercessional of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (or UNCSD2012) in New York in January, 2011. At this time, Munasinghe introduced the proposal as follows:

Millennium consumption goals (MCGs) could help make our development path more sustainable, by focusing on the 1.4 billion people in the richest 20% of the world’s population. They consume over 80% of global output, or 60 times more than the poorest 20%. Instead of viewing the rich as a problem, they should be persuaded to contribute to the solution. The MCGs will complement the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) designed to help the world’s poor. The MCGs need not be mandatory targets, but rather a set of benchmarks to be achieved by a combination of voluntary actions.

Munasinghe argues that a major obstacle to sustainable development is unsustainable consumption, production, and resource exploitation by the richest members of the global community, hinting that this is the cause of problems satisfying the MDGs. He continues, indicating that the same consumerist and exploitative behavior is responsible for climate change, which intensifies multiple threats such as poverty, hunger, illness, water and energy scarcity, and conflict.

Climate Sustainability

Munasinghe provides not only a fair assessment of current challenges, but a welcome argument for climate justice and right-to-development forums. A small group of rich and powerful countries, companies, and people continue to drag the rest of us through great grief toward a dangerous destiny that will have devastating long-term consequences for all. However, the promoters and governors of the prevailing global system are still convinced that growth, capital accumulation, and free markets provide answers for human survival, or at least for the global
elite who largely control the Earth’s resources, trade, and capital. The rest, especially the half of the world that lives in poverty, is insignificant in global decision making; the poor only constitute numbers in the system.

In my recent book (de Zoysa, 2009), entitled It Has to be CLIMATE SUSTAINABILITY, I argue that the global elite, both North and South, continue to drive the world away from sustainability and toward climate change: “Climate change is a destiny determining phenomenon and all people need to be aware of their rights and responsibilities. But, half of the world’s population remains under poverty and is being deprived of their rights towards the basic human needs. Meanwhile, the wasteful lifestyles and irresponsible behavior of the rich and powerful continues to endanger the life of all humans.”

Regulating Consumption

Munasinghe argues that there are many advantages to a set of MCGs as a complementary path to global sustainability. He states,

First, the rich live in both developed and developing countries, so the idea cuts across country boundaries, thus reducing the potential for deadlock due to nationalistic self-interest. Second, since they account for over 80% of consumption and pollution (including carbon emissions), small shifts towards more sustainable consumption can significantly reduce the burden on the environment and free up more resources to raise the consumption of the poor. Third, by relying on influencing the behaviour of large numbers of individual households, the approach has the potential to yield quicker results compared to top down government policies and large, long term industrial investments. Fourth, it mobilizes, empowers and links up sustainable consumers and producers (many of whom operate global supply chains) into a virtuous cycle that could spread quickly.

Several researchers have responded positively to the call for a series of MCGs. Erik Assadourian (2011) from the Worldwatch Institute proposes five goals: halve obesity and overweight rates by 2020; halve the American work week from the current 40+ hours to 20 hours per week; better distribute wealth by raising taxes on the wealthiest; double the use of nonmotorized transport; and guarantee access to health care for all. Philip Vergragt (2011) of the Telus Institute offers ten goals: reduce the area of personal per capita living space by 25%; deep-energy retrofit residential houses to reduce heating and cooling by 50%; reduce individual driving by 50%; reduce meat and dairy consumption by 80%; cook 80% of meals at home with fresh and possibly local ingredients; reduce working hours by 30%; conserve water by 50%; reduce shopping for new products by 80%; reduce waste by 90%; create progressive taxation of income and assets; create a universally accepted metric for well-being to replace gross domestic product (GDP); and create incentives and policies for living within our ecological and carbon footprint.

These proposals for radical reductions of consumption among the rich are quite acceptable. Yet, the list looks like a set of voluntary commitments by wealthy northern western consumers and may not bring about the hoped for transformational change. The greatest damage to the planet is by industries consuming natural resources and that needs to be addressed broadly to ensure sustainable consumption.

Greening the Economy or Sufficiency-based Prosperity?

I am not proposing just greening the existing industrial production system. Such efforts would clearly be insufficient to take us toward a carbon neutral society and to drive us away from materially wasteful lifestyles. A new green world order has to be more authentic than green labeling and green procurement business; sufficiency-based considerations will need to become more pertinent. Sufficiency can first reduce desire for overconsumption through a state of adequacy and contentment. It can also innovate on indigenous knowledge systems, enabling efficient production with reduced waste, so that communities become more self-reliant and less dependent on external resources.

Current efforts promoting a green economy, too, are making civil society and alternative economic thinkers across the world uneasy. Southern activists for equity and justice and northern thinkers about zero-growth economies are increasingly coming to view recent calls for green-economy initiatives as an attempt to greenwash the prevailing brown economy. The critics also fear that the social pillar of sustainable development may be compromised, leading toward continued poverty and inequity. A “sustainable economy” is herewith proposed to be an economic system that ensures social equity, protects ecological balance, and creates economic sufficiency. In other words, a sustainable economy should replace the current economic order of inequity and excessive consumption that has kept half of the world’s people in poverty and created a potential climate catastrophe. The core idea of a green economy, then, should be to enforce sustainability, as in the well-being of all people along with biodiversity. A sustainable econo-
unconcerned decide human destinies, are pointless. Should pay for mitigation and adaptation, where the over who is responsible for climate change and who access to resources by the majority. Ongoing debates system rewards exploitation by a few and obstructs production regimes and overconsuming societies. This reprehensible system that has promoted unsustainable pro-

as all humans, should be entitled to similar consump-
tion opportunities within a sustainable development framework. Poverty is a result of a hypocritical global governance system that has promoted unsustainable production regimes and overconsuming societies. This system rewards exploitation by a few and obstructs access to resources by the majority. Ongoing debates over who is responsible for climate change and who should pay for mitigation and adaptation, where the unconcerned decide human destinies, are pointless. This is in stark contrast to the idea of sustainability, which aims to ensure peace, prosperity, well-being, and increased happiness spread more equitably.

MCGs for the Poor

Arguably, the affluent can maintain or improve their quality of life, while reducing environmental burdens and using greener technologies and policies, but the poor cannot be expected to do so. Therefore, the MCGs should apply the principle of equity in consumption opportunities, advocating the rights of current and future generations to access resources. The MDGs do not adequately address these equity dimensions, but instead attempt to provide the basic requirements needed to eradicate dollar poverty, and even that goal is set at only half current levels by 2015.

While multilateral financial and governance institutions continue to assess poverty on economic measures, the millions of communities that live outside official economic structures, in nonformal economies, continue to suffer in poverty. The MDGs need to provide a more comprehensive approach not only to how they seek to address poverty based on economic indicators or standard nutrition and goods-supply targets. They should consider in totality the inequities of a world order that continues to deny a decent quality of life for the poor and strives to eliminate poverty on Earth.

Today, in poverty-ridden communities where access to food is hard to come by, waste dumps are the greatest consolation for the poor. Not only do they seek any form of edible leftovers, but in some African neighborhoods people have found a livelihood as hunters of rats living in urban waste mountains. These rats are caught and placed in small cages and fed with more waste. Once the rats have grown to the size of the cage, they are slaughtered and sold in local markets. In communities where a meal is a struggle, a rat on a plate is a luxury. Poverty-eradication programs cannot simply target goals to elevate the poor from this level to consume the bare minimum for survival or nourishment. They, as well as all humans, should be entitled to similar consumption opportunities within a sustainable development framework.

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MCGs for Emerging Consumerist Societies

The rich who reside among the poor in the developing countries, just like the rich in the industrialized nations, are threatening to increase global climate change and to multiply the crises of poverty, hunger, illness, and conflict. The rising consumer classes in the developing countries, especially in emerging market leaders such as China, India, and other Asian countries, will become a serious challenge to global food and resource supplies in the future. They, too, will need consumption goals.

The consumerist and wasteful culture that is so prevalent in the North has already infected the South. The megamalls in south Asia and in countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand are living examples of how the market induces consumers to feverishly purchase “desire driven wants” more than their “sustainable living based needs.” These malls are parasites that attract us in a subconscious process of buying. The hypermalls and supermarkets—especially in conjunction with advertising—have an amazing power over the human mind, and can induce us into spending on things we do not need and trick us to consume according to the wishes of the market system. Any observer visiting such a gigantic mall would be amazed by the volumes of people flocking daily and hourly and the amount of unwanted consumption that takes place. Rapid economic growth, higher-consumption lifestyles, constant switching to modern and sophisticated technology and equipment, and flashy personal cars have all become indicators and guidelines for newly emerging economies. These are not just impulse actions by the growing number of consumers with purchasing power, but part and parcel of the structural adjustment policies enforced by governments under the influence of the multilateral donor regimes that cater to the agendas of the rich industrialized nations.

The way forward toward prosperity in the emerging nations and societies cannot be through wasteful consumerism. It has to be based on the foundations of sustainable development that can ensure peace, prosperity, well-being, and increased happiness spread more equitably.

Voluntary Commitments and Civil Action at Multiple Levels

In the final analysis, Munasinghe proposes voluntary commitments and civil action to place pressure on governments. He says, “the focus is on setting targets for ACTION NOW by civil society and business, without having to wait for governments, which move glacially. This process also puts pressure
on leaders who lack the political will to act quickly and decisively.”

He further argues that,

[W]hile the initiative is pursued at the United Nations and international levels, progress can be made more rapidly at the grassroots. Many communities, companies, and cities have already announced targets for carbon emissions, energy and water conservation, etc., which constitute their own form of MCGs. Those who take early action will be at a competitive advantage, as we enter a future constrained by resource shortages.

Unfortunately, more voluntary commitments are needed from business, which continues to be the greatest obstacle to sustainable development. Just as the notion of corporate social responsibility has often been used simply as a promotional technique, firms have quickly jumped into advocating for an undefined green economy. Just as they benefitted from adopting small projects to support the MDGs, businesses may voluntarily take part only in the profit and public relations sides of the MCGs. To avoid having the MCGs become another attractive greenwash program for token feel-good action, a clear international agreement is needed. The two most readily accessible pathways are through the United Nations Ten-Year Framework of Programs on Sustainable Consumption and Production (10YFP) due to commence in 2012 and the United Nations Rio+20 Conference next year. The 10YFP, led by the United Nations Environment Program, after nine years of preparatory work has become a major disappointment. The effort has only resulted in loose voluntary commitments by governments and corporations in addition to an unimpressive assortment of conveniently sourced programs in a few parts of the world. The MCGs could serve as an instructive way to enhance the program’s value. The Rio+20 process, too, is heading toward a low-commitment outcome. The theme of the Green Economy in Relation to Poverty Eradication and Sustainable Development being advanced for the event next year in Brazil could easily be bolstered by incorporation of the proposed MCGs. In addition, the institutional framework for sustainable development could benefit from considering the possibilities of including a series of MCGs in the core of emergent global governance structures.

Conclusion

The prevailing unsustainable consumption and production system is the largest contributing factor to climate change, poverty, and inequity on Earth and thus requires greater emphasis and regulatory focus at the international level. If anthropogenic climate change is to be controlled, then developing a regulatory framework for sustainable consumption and production must become a priority. In very simple terms, unsustainable consumption and production needs to be effectively managed on a global scale, in parallel to emission cuts, as a solution to both problems of climate change and poverty. It would be naïve to imagine at this moment that governments or the business community will voluntarily reduce their consumption and change their profitable and wasteful habits out of deference to the planetary health and the conditions of the poor. The MCGs, therefore, should not be a substitute for an international agreement on sustainable consumption and production, but a supplementary program with strong enforcement mechanisms to help advance the objectives of this international framework.

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About the Author

Uchita de Zoysa is an internationally acclaimed thinker, writer, and speaker who is a frontline leader in mobilizing civil society for stakeholder alliances and a strategist shaping policy for the global sustainability movement. He is the author of several books, including It Has to be CLIMATE SUSTAINABILITY. De Zoysa began his professional life as an investigative environmental journalist, then moved on to creating a large civil society alliance in Sri Lanka. He also was a member of the International NGO Steering Committee of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 and subsequently served on the NGO steering committee of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development. He has authored several international and national reports and has played a leading role in the formulation of global independent sector collective
agreements such as the Oslo Declaration on Sustainable Consumption. He currently serves as the Chair of Global Sustainability Solutions, an international agency for sustainability solutions; Managing Director of D&D Strategic Solutions, a Sri Lanka-based firm specializing in corporate social responsibility and public relations; Executive Director of the Centre for Environment and Development, a sustainability and social justice NGO; and Convener of the Climate Sustainability PLATFORM, a global stakeholder forum for climate change. During the past two decades, he has travelled widely around the world participating in various global summits and has presented papers at more than a hundred meetings. De Zoysa lives in Sri Lanka and works toward creating a sustainable world and can be contacted at uchita@sltnet.lk.