



# Producing and Consuming in North America: A Call for Action and Leadership on Sustainability

Statement produced by participants of the experts workshop "Towards a North American Framework for Achieving Sustainable Production and Consumption," in Washington, DC on May 31 - June 1, 2005

## Time for North America

It is time for North Americans to join the global dialogue and take the necessary action to make our countries' production and consumption practices sustainable. Leadership on sustainability is needed at all levels, from the local to national and international. *We call on decisionmakers and our fellow citizens to take responsibility and action as global citizens to create and support a culture and economic system based on sustainable policies and practices.*

Despite many obstacles, the idea of *sustainability* is gradually taking root around the world. As a framework balancing social, environmental and economic priorities, sustainability offers a means towards achieving a better quality of life for everyone, including future generations. In turn, there is a growing understanding that global security depends on sustainable development. *Standing out among the world's regions in its leadership role within the global economy, North America has a unique opportunity as well as responsibility in taking the lead on sustainability.*

Yet in North America, as well as in other regions, sustainability remains on the sidelines of education, government and corporate policymaking. Many citizens and officials remain unaware or undecided about the necessity of sustainability. At the same time, advertising and mass media portray the "good life" as an endless shopping spree with no costs or consequences and no meaningful alternatives.

## Where are we heading?

People in North America work hard. We work more hours per year than we have in decades, with the shortest vacations in the industrialized world. We are only five percent of the earth's population, yet produce more than one-third of the world's GDP (about 11 trillion US dollars).<sup>1</sup> In turn, we consume five times the amount of goods as the global average.<sup>2</sup> The question is: *Are we truly improving the quality of life for ourselves and the world around us?*

In addition to SUVs, DVD players and big screen TVs, hamburgers, mini-mansions and sprawling suburbs, fashionable clothing, credit cards and cigarettes, we have made hybrid cars, solar panels, recycling centers and increasingly provide for a growing demand for green goods and services. We have made great strides in environmental, health and consumer protection laws, citizens' right to know, as well as innovations in energy and other technologies.

We are also the largest exporter of waste and pollution. We are the largest consumer of natural resources and energy. Per capita energy use in the US and Canada is the highest in the world. Among the industrialized countries we have the highest levels of poverty, particularly among children. While many Americans are overworked, others find their jobs outsourced or replaced by technology, as the gap between rich and poor grows wider. *In many ways we are undermining, not improving the overall quality of life.* At the same time, our media promotes a mass consumer lifestyle which the majority of the planet cannot afford nor the earth can provide.

## Drivers and impacts of production and consumption

For decades economic growth has been a national goal while many of the social and environmental costs were unseen or ignored. *We are now learning painful lessons about the impacts of North America's production and consumption patterns on the environment and human health.* The rise of cancer, heart and respiratory diseases from pollution, toxic waste and increasing presence of man-made chemicals in our homes and bodies parallels the destruction of species and ecosystems and changes to the earth's climate. Other impacts include the deepening social inequities of a production system which fails to provide sufficient jobs, affordable housing and healthcare to the poor.

*The impacts of North America's production and consumption patterns are felt around the world.* Consuming one-fourth of the world's energy supply, we produce more than a quarter of the greenhouse

gases.<sup>3</sup> Despite technological improvements in energy-efficient engines and fuel, more and larger automobiles are on the road, driving more miles than ever, while hidden subsidies and insufficient public transportation options encourage people to drive even more. As to electricity, the trend leans more towards increasing production and new energy sources than reducing demand, with more subsidies aimed at nuclear and fossil fuels than in stimulating investment in renewable energy systems.

As we consume the lion's share of the planet's natural resources, other countries are emulating our ways, despite the consequences. Together, these consequences represent a serious threat to our collective future. While trade and investment flows are regularly reported, the environmental and health impacts of these transactions are less carefully noted. *To improve the quality of life for ourselves and our neighbors, we must better understand, monitor and alleviate these impacts and the unsustainable patterns driving them.*

### Measuring our progress

*We need better ways of measuring progress.* Our current overemphasis on growth and GDP is inadequate to meet the challenges of the new century. For many Americans, the true "standard of living" is measured not by how many things we buy but rather the quality of life we enjoy. That quality also has an ethical dimension, as to the good or harm we bring to others.

A useful indicator of how much is commercially produced and consumed, GDP ignores many of the social and environmental costs of economic growth and waste. It also ignores the widening gap between poor and wealthy. In fact, sources of human suffering such as war, disasters, and costly medical treatments actually boost GDP. *It is time to guide our countries' policies and choices with appropriate measures of their full costs and benefits.* Tools such as the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) and ecological footprint are steps in this direction, but more needs to be done and integrated into policymaking and evaluation.

Such measures help us rethink our notion of "development." If we are to overcome our overdependency on energy, improve the efficiency and equity of our economy, and reduce the impacts of our production and consumption, we need new vision and strategy. Such vision requires responsible action from all parts of our society.

### Taking responsibility

North Americans have a responsibility to acknowledge and address the negative impacts of our growth and development activities on human and ecosystem health, locally and globally. This means changing our production and consumption patterns so that they meet our needs without causing harm to others. This calls for leadership throughout our society, by citizens young and old, by business, by educators and public interest groups, and by government.

Sustainability is not yet among the top ten issues of immediate concern to politicians, the mass media, or most citizens in North America. Nevertheless *a movement is afoot to change our patterns of production and consumption. Across the continent, the sustainability movement is growing, composed of countless individuals, organizations, and networks taking responsibility and leadership.*

For example:

Many individual **citizens and households** are taking steps to better understand and improve the ways they work and play, raise their families, plan their future, choose their leaders and participate in society. There is a greater demand for "green" products and "fair trade" goods. Consumers practicing *voluntary simplicity* are consciously moving away from the "cornucopia of commercial culture" towards a different definition of the "good life," as celebrated in Take Back Your Time Day. Some **youth** are also working to raise awareness and standards in the \$150 billion youth market.

Within **business**, many companies and investors are moving towards a broader definition of wealth and success. In addition to a rising demand for green products is a demand for greater corporate responsibility and accountability. Socially responsible investment (SRI) now accounts for over \$2.16 trillion in assets.<sup>4</sup> Adoption of extended producer responsibility (EPR) has helped reduce exports of hazardous wastes. Firms are also adopting principles of industrial ecology, lifecycle analysis and "cradle to cradle" approaches to product design and production processes, with some of them linking together in "green networks" of supplier, manufacturer, packaging and retail chains.

Across the continent, **educators** are forming networks and consortia of colleges and universities, locally and regionally, linking their efforts to provide education and research promoting sustainable development. Environmental, health, consumer rights, women, youth and other **public interest organizations** have also formed alliances and

networks to raise public awareness and understanding and to advocate for important legislative and regulatory protections as well as responsible governmental and corporate policies.

The US and Canadian governments have yet to reach an understanding and develop a cooperative regional framework addressing sustainable production and consumption issues. Nevertheless, various parts and levels of **government** are demonstrating leadership on sustainability, as in the enactment of the various city and state climate change plans.

### **A call for action and leadership**

In order to improve our quality of life we need to broaden our concept and methods of creating and using wealth. We need to move from higher incomes for some to better outcomes for everyone. This requires action and leadership throughout our society. We call to:

- *Citizens*, as both consumers and producers, to improve our knowledge and understanding about the environmental and social impacts of our consumption and production choices, practices and policies and to make these more socially responsible.
- *Business*, to adopt socially and environmentally responsible measures and standards, policies and practices (e.g., extending the responsibility chain for products they produce (EPR), developing green business networks, adopting full-cost accounting, participating in green purchasing networks.)
- *Investors*, to use their power as shareholders to pressure companies they own to increase their accountability to all stakeholders and develop socially and environmentally responsible systems and products. Invest in emerging sustainable and community enterprises that aim to create a better future for us all.
- *Educators*, to include sustainable production and consumption in academic curricula and other educational institutional policies. SPAC should also be key element and priority in the UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development.
- *Researchers*, to track and assess trends on material flows and impacts, consumption trends and sustainable product design and production processes. Establish regional, national and local systems for defining and monitoring progress towards sustainable production and consumption throughout North America.. Help establish

appropriate new measures and standards of progress to guide those policies and practices. Help to expand and promote the North American Sustainable Consumption and Production Database.<sup>5</sup>

- *Public interest groups*, to build greater public knowledge, capacity and demand for more sustainable choices. These groups also need to build greater knowledge, capacity and alliances within civil society to identify and help overcome the obstacles blocking sustainability from becoming a top governmental, corporate and civic priority.
- *Government* at all levels, from local to state and federal, to develop and implement policy frameworks, strategies and programs addressing sustainable production and consumption issues and objectives. (This could include advancing institutional greening, extended producer responsibility (EPR), subsidy reform, polluter pays, restriction of toxics in consumer products, among others.

### **A commitment**

Although only a small part of the 320 million people in our region, we commit ourselves to:

- Engage our fellow North Americans regarding our role and responsibility here and in the world regarding our pursuit of the good life and the sustainable production and consumption practices and policies that will provide it.
- Help build public support for government and business policies and practices which protects and promotes human and environmental health and well-being, encourages sustainable livelihoods and lifestyles, and reduces our region's ecological footprint.
- Develop a framework of action and cooperation to realize these aims.

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### **FOOTNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> World Bank. *The Little Green Data Book*, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> UN Environment Program. *Global Environment Outlook 3*, Earthscan, London, 2002, p.53.

<sup>3</sup> UNEP, p.53.

<sup>4</sup> Social Investment Forum.

<sup>5</sup> NASCA, see <http://nasca.icspac.net/db/>