

*Strategic Priorities for Promoting Sustainable Consumption in North America:*  
Experts Workshop  
The Worldwatch Institute, Washington, D.C.  
January 27, 2004

**SUMMARY**

On January 27, 2004, the Worldwatch Institute and the North American Sustainable Consumption Alliance (NASCA) hosted an experts workshop on “Strategic Priorities for Promoting Sustainable Consumption in North America.” The workshop was held in conjunction with the Worldwatch Institute’s eighth annual “State of the World” briefing, which focused on the theme of “The Consumer Society” and the implications of the world’s rapidly surging consumption for both humanity and the planet. Brian Halweil and Lisa Mastny (Worldwatch Institute) and Anne Berlin Blackman and Jack Luskin (University of Massachusetts Lowell) co-facilitated the workshop, which included 26 representatives of NGOs, international organizations, and private foundations. (See Appendix A for a complete list of participants.)

The experts workshop had four key objectives:

- To bring additional stakeholders into the discussion about sustainable consumption in North America that has been taking place within the framework of NASCA since October 2001. (For background information on NASCA, visit <http://nasca.icspac.net>.)
- To advance the process of developing - within the framework of NASCA - a concrete, constructive, and collaborative strategy for promoting sustainable consumption in North America.
- To identify 3-5 specific areas of opportunity for promoting sustainable consumption (e.g., particular industries, products or services, regional markets, or target audiences) where efforts are likely to have maximum impact and leverage or catalyze additional change over the next three years.
- To facilitate the exchange of information between NGOs and funders regarding strategies for promoting large-scale changes to consumption patterns.

The original intent was to focus the workshop on making progress at the international level (i.e., Canada, the United States, and Mexico), as previous NASCA meetings had done. However, because most of the workshop participants came from the United States, the workshop was refocused on making progress at the national (U.S.) level. It is expected that the outcome of this workshop will feed in to the continuing discussions at the international level. In addition, it was noted that several Canadian members of NASCA are planning to hold a similar experts workshop in Ottawa in April 2004 in order to advance the process of promoting sustainable consumption at the national level there. Exploratory discussions are taking place regarding an experts workshop in Mexico.

### “Open Space” Exercise: Suggested Priority Actions

To meet the third workshop objective (see above), the workshop organizers used “open space technology”<sup>1</sup> to facilitate small group discussions about elements of a national sustainable consumption strategy. Prior to the workshop, the organizers asked participants to indicate up to four specific areas of opportunity for promoting sustainable consumption that they thought could begin to produce tangible results over the next three years. The organizers classified participants’ suggestions into five categories for further discussion and refinement by participants.

At the workshop, the participants organized themselves into small break-out groups around each of the categories based on their individual interests. They then redefined the categories and identified priority activities before reporting back to the larger group, as summarized below:

#### **1. Government Initiatives**

- *Priority actions suggested:* Work to make sure that the federal government supports comprehensive product labeling, raises consumers’ awareness about products (manufacture, composition, environmental impact, etc.), and protects consumers’ right-to-know.
- *Rationale:* Our experience after the 2002 WSSD in Johannesburg has shown us that voluntary initiatives are not enough to protect the public interest.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Open Space is a large group process that brings ‘the whole system into the room.’ Open Space increases collaboration by combining the open marketplace of ideas with the building of a learning community.” See <http://www.ourfuture.com/osover.htm> (providing a description of open space technology and how it works).

Americans are allergic to the word "regulation", but the only way to set collective game rules for long-term sustainability is to have rules set at the political level. We're not looking for more "command and control" regulation, just a shift from corporate responsibility to corporate accountability. Government regulation will also mobilize the innovative capacity of the corporate sector by helping it to operate on a level playing field.

## 2. Industry

- *Priority actions suggested:* Campaign to make Wal-Mart more sustainable (socially, economically, environmentally). Suggested slogan for shoppers: "not just a bargain, but a just bargain". Change the composition of boards of directors of U.S. companies to include people with a sustainability ethic. Look for "legacy moments" when the founder CEOs are about to step down.
- *Rationale:* Because industry is central to all production and consumption activities, any production- and consumption-related campaign should focus on industry. We should be willing to go for the "big fruit" (e.g., Wal-Mart), not just the "low-hanging fruit." The process need not necessarily be antagonistic – in many cases we can use a positive engagement process. For example, we could offer to cohost an open stakeholder forum that would help a company to assess its impacts and make suggestions for improvement. We could try this with smaller companies first and let them testify to the value of the process as a hook to engage the larger companies.

## 3. Purchasing

- *Priority actions suggested:* Green the "big guys" - especially government and retailers. Target specific entities for campaigns.
- *Rationale:* In North America, people don't expect much of their governments (the "Cult of Impotence" phenomenon). As a result, people might put more faith in market-based change. Nevertheless, governments still have a responsibility to help drive the market for environmentally preferable products. Because of their size, governments and retailers have a disproportionate impact on consumption patterns. There is existing evidence of the potential success of this approach – for example, Home Depot moving to products certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, or municipalities shifting to green cleaning supplies. Retailers in every sector, from food to home improvement to furniture, also set terms that affect the global supply chain. Individual consumers may want to do the

right thing through their purchases, but it is often difficult for them to find or afford environmentally preferable products. By targeting retailers, we don't have to answer all the questions (e.g., how to reach the individual consumer), and we can use their marketing and distribution clout to change the sorts of products they sell and to make green products more affordable. Since these big retailers are recognizable brands, they will be more susceptible to targeted campaigns.

**4. Communicating** (includes advertising, marketing, educating in a manner that promotes sustainable consumption)

- *Priority actions suggested:* Develop a message about sustainable consumption that is concrete, actionable and positive. Select appropriate messengers: use new media (Internet) and pop culture to spread the message. Incorporate sustainable consumption into formal education/training curricula.
- *Rationale:* It is very difficult to place an alternative message in traditional media, and sustainable production and consumption (SPAC) is "alternative" because it contradicts the concept of a global and grabbing economy. The most creative people in the world are attracted to the advertising industry, which perpetuates consumerism. They should be allowed a chance to explore the potential in raising awareness about SPAC. Is sustainable consumption too amorphous an issue to market it effectively? UNEP has had experience working with the advertising industry to give sustainable consumption a positive spin. It needs to be shown as being sexy and cool. People need to be inspired to do something positive, not chastised for doing something negative. Appeal to Americans' self-esteem: you're doing something good!

**5. Promoting Sustainable Consumption**

- *Priority actions suggested:* Promote multistakeholder dialogue. Promote working groups and networks. Create concrete pilot projects. Identify common interests, opportunities and obstacles. Organize a national meeting/conference. Promote a national action plan.
- *Rationale:* We need a strategy that coordinates the needs of all organizations working on sustainable consumption. A lot is going on, but there is a lot of duplication and a lot of areas are not receiving attention. We need to empower people and make sure that they work together. We have NASCA, so we're not starting from scratch. NASCA should act as a vehicle to deal with this movement on sustainable consumption and build

on the diversity. Organizations should be given an opportunity to focus on common goals and pool their common resources, not just brainstorm some more. A national conference would be most helpful if it served the purpose of planning a particular campaign.

All five break-out groups highlighted the urgent need to reform national government policy so that it supports citizen groups and businesses in their efforts to promote sustainable production and consumption. Commitments are needed on the national level to adequately educate and inform consumers and make corporations accountable.

### Facilitated Discussion: Working Together

To meet the second and fourth workshop objectives (see above), the facilitators posed the following questions:

1. Can and should we (NGOs, international organizations, and private foundations) work together to promote sustainable consumption in the U.S.?
2. How? (In what areas should we work together and where should we continue to work apart?)
3. Are any of the actions or strategies proposed during the “Open Space” exercise fundable?

NGOs:

- SPAC is about changing the economic system, an idea that may seem vaguely subversive to some Americans. Organizations need to find a way to make clear that SPAC offers an alternative to the “buy more” culture: a vision of a more human economy in harmony with the environment.
- A campaign to promote sustainable consumption requires either a brilliant vision and strategy, or volume (many people doing lots of simple things).
- We have been working on promoting sustainable consumption for many years now (eco-labeling, extended producer responsibility, etc.) but in a piecemeal way. There are a number of different campaigns and networks being formed that focus on particular issues (e.g., green purchasing, corporate social responsibility). However, they have yet to connect and

- communicate with each other as a movement. NASCA should bring these networks and campaigns together to bring greater empowerment to all.
- NASCA can play an important role in helping organizations develop a national strategy and communicate a national message (Open Space categories four and five above).
  - Our organizations have different areas of focus, and that's a good thing. We don't need to come to agreement about everything in order to work together more effectively.
  - Dealing with common obstacles is a good example of a way in which people can work together and not compete: if the obstacles are removed, everyone benefits.
  - NGOs are especially looking for signs of philanthropic support for their efforts to work together to elevate the profile of sustainable consumption issues at a national level.

*International organizations:*

- There is a need for a common vision in the U.S. Friends of the Earth (Europe) came up with a quantified vision of a Sustainable Europe, which was something that all European NGOs could plug into. The U.S. needs something similar.
- Civil society in the U.S. is doing a lot around the issue of sustainable consumption. The perception abroad, however, is that nothing is happening in the U.S. around this topic because the U.S. government isn't doing anything in this area. Civil society in the U.S. needs a communications strategy to showcase what it is doing, both to inform colleagues in other countries and to inspire and encourage other Americans.
- Sustainable consumption is a very vague term, but it wouldn't be productive to spend a lot of time trying to come up with alternative nomenclature (others elsewhere have tried).

*Funders:*

- U.S. NGOs should talk to each other and coalesce around issues. This is something the funding community would welcome.

- It's hard to predict future support for a coordinated sustainable consumption campaign within the philanthropic community. Currently, there is not very much foundation money flowing to anyone focusing holistically on SPAC.
- The Environmental Grantmakers Association's Working Group on Sustainable Consumption and Production is trying to communicate the importance of SPAC to the broader funding community.

### Facilitated Discussion: Suggested Next Steps

Participants discussed the following activities or actions as potential next steps:

- Determine participants' interest in and commitment to the activities or actions discussed in the "Open Space" exercise.
- Expand the NASCA database of SPAC activities and initiatives to make it an even more useful tool to promote collaboration and coordination (see <http://www.p2win.org/main/ns/7/doc/89/lang/EN>). Add metrics to show what the projects listed in the database have achieved, how many people have participated, and what strategies have worked.
- Seek additional funding to conduct a more systematic analysis of trends and activities taking place in the U.S., including an examination of the gaps in communication among groups, the nature of the obstacles they are encountering, and the potential means for overcoming those obstacles.
- Prepare a report on U.S. civil society's accomplishments, challenges, and ongoing efforts to promote sustainable consumption. Submit this report as a U.S. civil society contribution to the post-WSSD review of national progress on sustainable development.
- Seek funding for a NASCA "strategy summit." Building upon the ideas discussed during this experts workshop, summit participants will develop a blueprint for a comprehensive national strategy around sustainable consumption. They will also produce an action plan for U.S. NGOs that spells out their roles and responsibilities in the strategy implementation process.