Fostering Sustainable Consumption:
The Role of a Global Citizens Movement

Third SCORAI Workshop:
Challenging Consumerism: Toward Living Well Sustainably

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Abstract

Conventional strategies to promote sustainable consumption have focused primarily on two dimensions of the problem: technological improvements to increase resource efficiency in the production of goods and services, and consumer education to alter individual household purchasing decisions. While both approaches can demonstrate positive impact, they have not succeeded in preventing the continued growth in global resource use. Indeed, one could argue the culture of consumerism has largely remained unchallenged.

This paper focuses on the global and systemic aspects of consumption and explores the issue of agency for effectively challenging consumerism. Drawing on scenario analysis of alternative futures, particularly a “Great Transition” scenario, it acknowledges the limitations of existing institutional actors – government, business, and civil society – for achieving the transformational changes required, and considers the prospect of a global citizens movement as a systemic change agent. The paper then describes The Widening Circle strategy, an incipient real-world international effort aimed at advancing the conditions for a global citizens movement. It suggests that an adaptive global institutional approach that reflects a systemic understanding could be a powerful actor in building a social movement that challenges consumerism and moves towards living well sustainably.

1 This paper and the concept of a global citizens movement draws heavily from the work of the Great Transition Initiative <www.gtinitiative.org>.
1. **Introduction**

The literature on sustainable consumption identifies several key dimensions that are important for understanding the context, drivers, and complex dynamics of consumerism, as well as possible leverage points for countering its impacts. One consideration is spatial. Consumption has a myriad of local, regional, national, and global attributes. Policy initiatives and other interventions can be targeted along this geographic spectrum to address markets, labor pools, supply chains, emission impacts, and others. A second dimension is motivational or behavioral. Consumption can be understood from an individual or household perspective as well as having social context and meaning. Economist Robert Frank refers to this as “relative consumption” or “positional arms races.” (Frank, 2007) A third aspect relates to the role of technology and considers the importance of resource efficiency in fostering sustainable consumption. And finally, a fourth critical aspect is the overall context in which consumption of goods and services takes place, a complex interconnected global political-economic system that affects virtually all aspects of society.

In past efforts to counter consumerism and advance sustainable consumption, much emphasis has been placed on the first three dimensions, while the broader social context driving consumption and its global nature have received relatively less attention. Examples of efforts aimed at modifying individual behavior and/or addressing consumerism locally include “buy local” campaigns, product labeling initiatives, bartering systems, the promotion of downshifting, voluntary simplicity, as well as consumer education initiatives and the marketing of “green products.” (Bostrom and Klintman, 2004)

Similarly, there continue to be robust research and policy initiatives aimed at improving resource efficiency in producing goods and services. Programmatic efforts since the 1980s have evolved from pollution prevention and waste reduction, to cleaner production and green manufacturing, to industrial ecology, dematerialization and decoupling.

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2 Important exceptions include the work of Juliet Schor, such as her most recent book, *Plenitude, The New Economics of True Wealth*, Tim Jackson’s *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*, and his earlier edited volume, *Earthscan Reader in Sustainable Consumption*, and others.
This emphasis on “green” products and services and the need to modify individual consumption behavior, including a focus on localism, is consistent with a dominant cultural narrative that does not question the underlying socio-economic system, but focuses on technological advances and better personal decisions as key factors for making our consumption and production systems sustainable.

Most responses to date from governments, businesses, and to some extent civil society, have largely reflected the dominant narrative concerning the ill effects of overconsumption and have focused narrowly on promoting the development and broad acceptance of eco-friendly substitute goods in the marketplace. It is not surprising, therefore, that such efforts have been fragmented and, ultimately, ineffective in stemming the growth of global resource use or challenging the culture of consumerism.

The above framing is consistent with the findings from the 2011 workshop convened by the Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (SCORAI) that examined three areas of research on sustainable consumption: socio-technical transitions, social practice theory, and political economy of consumption. The aim was to deepen intellectual links among these perspectives and to contribute to ongoing policy debates on reducing material throughput while meeting human needs. The introduction to a forthcoming book on the workshop describes the contributions and limitations of each approach to our understanding of sustainable consumption, and identifies the need to better understand a fourth perspective: the role of social movements. (Cohen, Vergragt, Brown, 2012)

The remainder of this paper focuses on the less-explored fourth dimension of consumerism, the broader context of a complex global political-economic system, and considers the question of agency for addressing sustainable consumption within this context. Section 2 describes the evolution of the Great Transition Initiative (GTI), an attempt to explore alternative global futures through the use of scenarios, and what these scenarios reveal in terms of our ability to impact the

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3 A high-profile example from government is U.S. EPA’s Energy Star program, which promotes more efficient appliances, electronics, and buildings. Among the many “green” initiatives from business are Walmart’s well-publicized sustainability initiative and General Electric’s Ecomagination program.

4 For a detailed discussion of these research domains and the workshop papers see Cohen, Vergragt, Brown (forthcoming 2012).
future trajectory of society in terms of consumption patterns, ecological health, and human well-being. It focuses particularly on the Great Transition scenario – a transformation to a sustainable future characterized by material sufficiency, social solidarity and equity, and environmental resilience – and raises the question: who are the “agents of change” for such a transformation?

Section 3 addresses this question and explores the possibility of a global citizens movement to steer humanity towards this promising future. In addressing the issue of agency, it affirmatively addresses questions raised at SCORAI’s inaugural workshop in 2009, namely: Is a new social movement required to affect lifestyle choices and/or to spur systemic change? And, is a more strategic response required to focus activist energy on systemic changes in the institutional-political-economic realm?

And Section 4 is an initial attempt to draw links between the challenges of sustainable consumption and the efforts to promote a global citizens movement for systemic change towards a Great Transition. It introduces The Widening Circle (TWC) strategy as one incipient real-world attempt to advance a global citizens movement, describing how such an effort might be useful in challenging consumerism and promoting living well sustainably. As an emergent effort TWC reflects an understanding of consumerism as a cultural phenomenon embedded in the larger political-economic system. The discussion in this section is intended to begin an exploration and dialogue among scholars and activists as to the potential a TWC-type strategy.

2. Envisioning an Alternative Future: Implications for Sustainable Consumption

The focus on sustainable development that was prompted by Brundtland Commission report in 1987 (WCED, 1987) and the UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 gave new urgency to the study of the future. The challenge of sustainability posed fundamental questions: Are our current production and consumption practices on a sustainable path? How might global development evolve over the coming decades? What surprises could steer the global system in unanticipated directions? How do environmental, social, and economic processes interact, and what is their impact on the direction and pace of change? What actions, policies, and value changes can best ensure a sustainable future? And who are the key actors to drive such change?
With these questions in mind, in 1995 the Stockholm Environment Institute and Tellus Institute convened the Global Scenario Group (GSG), an international, interdisciplinary body to examine the requirements for a sustainable and desirable future. The GSG recognized that scenario analysis offered insight into the consequences of current actions and uncertainties and could inform rational decision-making. The GSG developed a set of narrative and quantitative long-range alternative global and regional scenarios (Raskin, et al. 1998, 2002; Gallopin, et. al. 1997).^5^  

The GSG’s culminating essay, “Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead,” describes three classes of scenarios for global development, *Conventional Worlds*, *Barbarization* and *Great Transitions*:^6^  

“*Conventional Worlds* assume the global system in the twenty-first century evolves without major surprise, sharp discontinuity, or fundamental transformation in the basis of human civilization. The dominant forces and values currently driving globalization shape the future. Incremental market and policy adjustments are able to cope with social, economic and environmental problems as they arise. *Barbarization* foresees the possibilities that these problems are not managed. Instead, they cascade into self-amplifying crises that overwhelm the coping capacity of conventional institutions. Civilization descends into anarchy or tyranny. *Great Transitions*, […] envision profound historical transformations in the fundamental values and organizing principles of society. New values and development paradigms ascend that emphasize the quality of life and material sufficiency, human solidarity and global equity, and affinity with nature and environmental sustainability.”(Raskin et. al, 2002, pp. 14-15)  

These scenarios provide a useful framework for considering different patterns of consumption and broader societal development. The Great Transition scenario introduced a powerful vision and framework for considering a positive alternative future. The new values that define the Great Transition scenario are:  

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^5^ The scenarios developed by the Scenarios Group have been used by a number of international assessments, including the United Nations Environment Programme’s third Global Environment Outlook (UNEP 2002).  

^6^ Two variants were developed for each class of scenario, each representing different assumptions about potential societal response to social and environmental challenges. The Great Transition scenario discussed below refers to the New Sustainability Paradigm variant.
Transition scenario implicitly confront consumerism and redefine quality of life. To further explore the potential for such a future, Tellus Institute and partners launched the Great Transition Initiative (GTI) in 2003, comprising an international network of scholars and activists that elaborates alternative visions and pathways for a hopeful future.

GTI’s efforts are based on several key premises about the nature of key economic, environmental, and social challenges facing the world and the potential political and institutional strategies to address them. First, many of these challenges are global in nature. This is not only true for climate change and other threats to the biosphere, but due to deep and complex interconnections it also holds for a host of economic and social challenges as well, including sustainable consumption.

Second, the various challenges are linked in a single system: the global political economy drives economic activity, which leads to environmental consequences as well as a range of social impacts such as inequality. And third, achieving a transition to a sustainable world (a “Great Transition”) – one characterized by social solidarity, ecological resilience, and human fulfillment – is still possible, but requires global systemic transformation, including deep cultural shifts in values and behavior.

The deep cultural shifts envisioned in the Great Transition scenario raise a set of fundamental questions about agency, most importantly: How can such a transformation be accomplished and who are the agents of change? Existing institutions do not appear to be up the task. The private sector is driven by growth and profit considerations, not by a vision of a transformed society. Government institutions are constrained by nationalist interests and/or are entrenched in upholding the status quo. And as described below, civil society remains too fragmented to cohere behind a shared vision of global systemic transformation.

3. The Question of Agency: The Emergence of A Global Citizens Movement
There is growing evidence in various parts of the world of associated citizens calling for a fundamental change of course. The large annual gatherings of the World Social Forum, global movements for social justice and the environment, and coordinated campaigns to influence
international climate policy are the tangible expressions of rising public concern. Just in the past year the so-called “Arab Spring” and the Occupy Movement are potent reminders of the power of citizen action. Without these impressive efforts, global conditions would undoubtedly be more perilous and the prospects for change less hopeful.

Some point to the multitude of progressive civil society organizations as evidence that transformational change is underway. (Hawken, 2007) But most existing civil society organizations and campaigns remain issue-oriented and/or place-based, and therefore do not address the underlying structural drivers that can leverage systemic societal transformation. Raskin and colleagues in GTI argue that, while laudatory, partial and dispersed actions are insufficient to foster a new pathway for the global future. They suggest that without a shared “overarching vision and strategy, systemic deterioration on a larger scale overwhelms painstaking gains in specific locales and on particular issues.”(Raskin, 2010, pp. 2-3) In this light, the vitality of recent civil society activities can be seen as laying the groundwork for a more coherent global movement capable of advancing the required global governance institutions and policy approaches – and at the same time calling attention to the important need for such coherence.

One possibility identified by GTI and others is for individuals around the globe to embrace a shared identity as global citizens and mobilize in a “global citizens movement” (GCM). For this to happen would require broad recognition that that the specific issues and activities that motivate the work of so many individuals and organizations – from climate change and deforestation to poverty, growing inequality, and unsustainable consumption patterns – are interconnected and that effectively addressing these challenges calls for a common effort towards Great Transition-like systemic transformation. The increased globalization of recent decades as well the emergence of environmental threats on a planetary scale are unprecedented, historic conditions, and heighten the prospects for and necessity of a GCM.

The precise form and character of a GCM is impossible to predict, but as with other large-scale social movements, it would be shaped by a set of overarching shared principles, such as those identified by GTI. One such principle is the need to balance unity and diversity though the
concept of “constrained pluralism.” With a successful GCM, the plethora of citizens and civil society organizations at all levels (local, regional, national, and global) would continue to grow and flourish, but they would be shaped by a shared vision of an alternative future and an understanding of their systemic context and linkages. Viewed in this way, the GCM can best be characterized as a multifaceted political and social cultural movement, rather than a single coordinated entity.


One incipient effort to advance the conditions for a global citizens movement is a multi-organization collaboration called The Widening Circle (TWC) strategy. Formalized in the fall of 2010 at a “Synergizer” meeting of several dozen people affiliated with leading civil society organizations from around the world, TWC describes itself as “an expanding global initiative dedicated to strengthening the unity and coherence of the popular movements for just and sustainable global development.”

While still at an early stage, TWC has evolved in both scale and scope. As of February 2012, TWC has established:

- a Coordinating Circle\(^7\) that provides guidance and facilitation;
- a Circle of Allies\(^8\) comprising organizations that support TWC;

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\(^7\) Raskin (2006) suggests that constrained pluralism “includes three complementary ideas: irreducibility, subsidiarity, and heterogeneity. The irreducibility principle states that the adjudication of certain issues is necessarily and properly retained at the global level of governance. Global society has the responsibility for ensuring universal rights, the integrity of the biosphere, the fair use of common planetary resources, and for the conduct of cultural and economic endeavors that cannot be effectively delegated to regions. The subsidiarity principle dictates that the scope of irreducible global authority be sharply limited. To promote effectiveness, transparency, and public participation, decision-making should be guided to the most local feasible level of government. The heterogeneity principle validates the rights of regions to pursue diverse forms of development and democratic decision-making constrained only by their obligations to conform to global responsibilities and principles.”


\(^9\) The Coordinating Circle includes approximately 15 individuals, many of whom are affiliated with leading civil society organizations in the global North and South.

\(^10\) The Circle of Allies is an evolving group. As of January 2012 it included: Awakening the Dreamer, Center for Environment Education – India, Committee for a Democratic U.N., Earth Charter Initiative, IBASE (Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis), Forum for a New World Governance, Four Years. Go., Global Sustainability Solutions, Great Transition Initiative, Kosmos Journal, Pachamama Alliance, The Forum on Religion & Ecology at Yale, Tellus Institute, and Transition US.
Regional Circles in Southern Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America that pursue activities of regional priority; and

- Issue Circles, including the Smart CSOs (Civil Society Organizations) Initiative, and the Global Governance Circle.

The figure below presents a simplified illustration of the structure:

![The Widening Circle diagram](image)


As the strategy matures, one can envision how TWC and the global citizens movement it is working to advance are structured to effectively address key dimensions of sustainable consumption. Most of the high-profile efforts around sustainable consumption have to date been government led (e.g., UNEP, OECD, EU), and/or have focused on specific sectors or geographies. (OECD, 2008; UNEP, 2005) In contrast, TWC offers a citizen- and civil society-led effort that has global scope and embraces a systemic perspective.

The following discussion is an initial exploration of the potential a TWC-type strategy for advancing a broad social movement may have for confronting consumerism and promoting living well sustainably. It is introduced to spur further dialogue among scholars and activists concerning the question of agency, the capacity of existing institutional actors, and the potential for the TWC strategy to advance a global citizens movement.
First, TWC could serve as a civil society platform for North/South dialogue on sustainable consumption. The dialogue may include the role of sustainable consumption within the global political-economic system, levers and agents of change, as well related subsidiary issues such as supply chains, trade regimes, labor practices, resource and environmental impacts. For several years the Great Transition Initiative has facilitated similar electronic dialogues among several hundred participants from around the world on a wide range of cutting edge issues related to transformational systemic change and the role of global citizens. These dialogues have furthered participants’ collective understanding of the substantive issues involved and in some cases fostered joint publications. More importantly, they have forged collaborative relationships and partnerships among participants and/or the organizations with which they are affiliated, building a politics of trust. This experience can serve as a useful model for TWC.

Second, TWC could establish a sustainable consumption issue circle, comprising members from around the world, including from existing regionally-based organizations such as SCORAI. Embedding sustainable consumption issues in the broader TWC framework will bring a systemic perspective to its activities. A sustainable consumption issue circle could engage participants from the countries/regions where many key links in the supply chains of important sectors are located. There are also many labor, environmental, and justice organizations with which it could collaborate. As with any issue circle, its specific foci and activities would be determined by its participants, but one could imagine a wide range of research, educational, and activist possibilities. For example, TWC could support a powerful citizens movement voice in the current debate in many parts of the world on how best to define and measure human development and well-being. Promoting a change in focus in the global North towards quality of life rather than GDP as the measure of well-being has important implications for consumption patterns. More importantly, it could have a deeper cultural impact of modeling a change in values and lifestyles away from consumerism. Notwithstanding the short-term imperative for the poor to reach a reasonable level of material consumption, this redefinition of well-being could potentially change the long-term lifestyles and consumption patterns to which many in the global South aspire.
At a more prosaic level, a TWC focus on sustainable consumption would connect with, support, and broaden existing issue-oriented or place-based political campaigns. For example, by linking consumer education and labeling efforts in North America to worker health and safety or environmental initiatives in Latin America, TWC could play a role in forging deeper understanding and collaboration among currently disparate activities and strengthening an overall movement for sustainably produced goods. This kind of educational and linkage activity has potential application across many sectors where consumers are primarily in the North and producers in the South, thereby broadening existing “fair trade” efforts.

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The TWC is but one effort to advance a global citizens movement. While the success of a TWC-type effort is highly uncertain, it does bring to the fore the issue of agency and the role of social movement-building in challenging consumerism. Whatever its ultimate form(s), some institutional manifestation of a global citizens movement appears to be necessary to address the global, systemic aspects of consumption. Whether or not TWC moves forward, its structure, scope, and underlying principles reflect many of the key attributes that will be necessary to advance such a movement.
References


