

# URBAN ENVIRONMENT CONSUMPTION

Did you know that people in highly industrialized countries consume 215 litres of water per person per day, and in Africa only 50 litres?



Christine Stroblen/Topham Picturepoint/UNEP

## The consumption gap

By 1998, global expenditure on private and public consumption reached US\$24 trillion, twice the level of 1975 and six times that of 1950. In 1900, real consumption expenditure was barely US\$1.5 trillion. Consumption in industrialized countries has increased steadily over the past 25 years (about 2.3 percent annually). In East Asia, the increase has been a spectacular 6.1 percent per year and in South Asia, 2.0 percent. But in Africa, the average household consumes 20 percent less than it did 25 years ago. Worldwide, the burning of fossil fuels has almost quintupled since 1950, causing most of the air pollution in cities. Although such non-renewable resources are not yet running out, renewable resources are being seriously depleted. The consumption of fresh water has almost doubled since 1960. The marine catch has increased fourfold. Wood consumption, both for industry and for household fuel, is now 40 percent higher than 25 years ago. The tipping point between sustainable and harmful consumption, however, depends not just upon amounts of consumption but also upon its patterns and effects.<sup>1</sup>

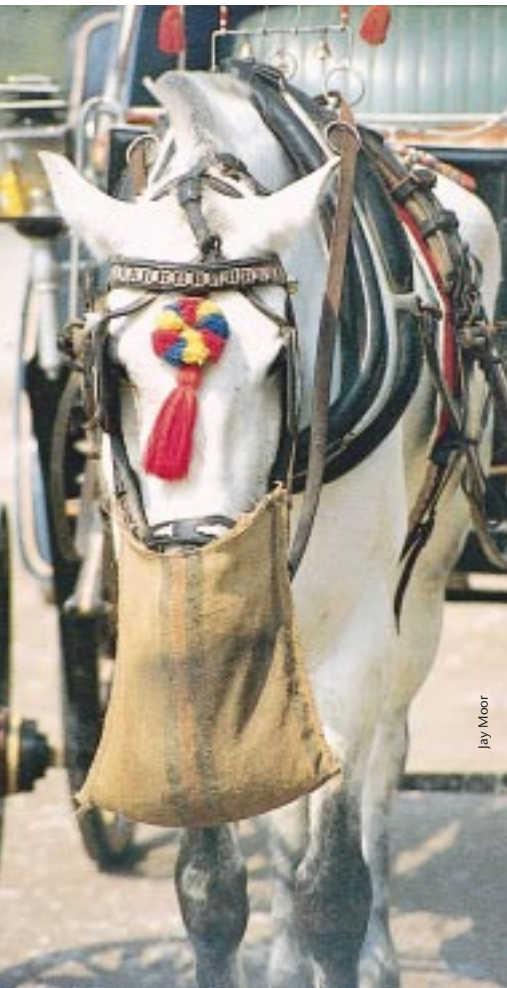
## The purpose of globalization?

Cities of the developed world are dense aggregates of producers fuelling a nation's economy. They have also become, in the past 50 years, the locus of massive individual consumption, the driving force behind the current phase of globalization. Modern development has meant creating and distributing enough wealth for the population to become consumers, whilst concentrating that population in cities where both production and consumption have the greatest multiplier effect. The geometric growth in consumption and waste, which has expanded threefold in the past 20 years, is damaging the environment in unprecedented ways. The pollution and waste generated - principally in the cities of developed world - is about to exceed the planet's capacities to absorb and convert them. Yet despite high rates of consumption, poverty and deprivation are found in all industrialized countries, even increasing in some. Between 7 and 17 percent of the population in industrialized countries is poor. More than 100 million people in rich nations suffer from underconsumption and deprivation. Nearly 200 million people are not expected to survive to age 60. At least 37 million are without jobs.

Commercial competition for the high profit margins that come with discretionary expenditure by a rapidly expanding leisure class has elevated even essential goods and services, such as eyeglasses and medical treatment, beyond reach of the poor.

## A matter of life and death

A child born in the industrialized world consumes and pollutes more in its lifetime than do 30-50 children in developing countries; yet the environmental damage from global consumption falls most heavily on the poor. The urban poor in developing countries are most exposed to toxins and pollution and least able to protect themselves. Leaded petrol, used more in the cities of developing countries than in industrialized countries, is crippling human health. In Bangkok, up to 70,000 children are reported to be at risk of losing four or more IQ points because of high lead emissions. As a result of increasing impoverishment, and the absence of other alternatives, a growing number of poorer people are putting unprecedented pressures on the environment in their struggle to survive. Because consumption levels for more than a billion people have been too low even to meet their basic needs, it cannot responsibly be argued that restraint on consumption by the poor is the way to limit environmental damage. Yet how are people in developing countries to raise their standard of living, even to a minimum threshold, without further damaging the already vulnerable environment?



Jay Moor

Poor countries may try to repeat the industrialization and growth processes of the past half century, and in doing so go through a development phase that is inequitable and creates an enormous legacy of environmental pollution. Or, they may leapfrog both consumption patterns and production technologies, accelerating consumption growth and human development without huge environmental costs.

### Aim for eco-efficiency

Policy and behavioural changes in all cities are prerequisites for resource conservation. By investing in energy efficiency, countries can stretch existing supply capacities, free up capital for investments, and reduce pollution. Efficiency improvements in water use could also avert current water crises in cities worldwide.

Together with improving the efficient use of resources, there is an urgent need to reduce waste by promoting recycling and reuse. Cities provide excellent opportunities for the use of organic waste as compost, wastewater in urban agriculture, and inorganic waste in the secondary materials economy. This is the broad agenda of eco-efficiency, and can bring additional employment, improve the living environment, while reducing the ecological footprint of cities.

Improving the eco-efficiency of cities and other settlements also requires a fresh look at current technology. Appropriate technology - tools that promote eco-efficiency - will be an important ally in bringing about efficiency improvements, and in some countries, producers have already set targets to achieve these. Local authorities could set similar targets for their cities. Government at all levels should promote waste recycling and reuse by supporting not only the industry but also community and informal initiatives, particularly, women's groups, which have often proven their effectiveness as agents of change. Governments could also act as role models by implementing in-house efficiency programmes. The international community can help by standard setting, monitoring and promoting eco-efficient technologies.

### Seven targets

- Set minimum consumption standards for all as an explicit policy objective in all countries;
- Develop and apply technologies that are environmentally sustainable for both poor and affluent consumers;
- Remove regressive subsidies, and restructure taxes to shift incentives from consumption that damages the environment to consumption that promotes human development;
- Strengthen public action for consumer education, information and environmental protection;
- Strengthen international mechanisms to manage consumption's global impacts;
- Build alliances among the movements for consumer rights, environmental protection, poverty eradication, gender equality and children's rights; and
- Think globally, but act globally and locally. Build on the burgeoning initiatives of people in communities everywhere, and foster synergies in the actions of civil society, the private sector and government.

### A city saving water – Zaragoza, Spain

The inhabitants of Zaragoza experienced severe water restrictions, which led to an initiative to promote water-saving consciousness, with the aim of saving 1,000 million litres of domestic water per year through simple technological changes. All sections of the community – government, business, education and community organizations - collaborated to reduce domestic water consumption by 592 million litres, in an initiative which has attracted interest from the Northern and Southern Hemisphere alike.

