



The New Consumers

In this special edition of our View from the field series, Article 13 Associate Professor Norman Myers considers the environmental impact of increasing consumerism in emerging economies such as China and India.

We hear much about China's booming economy. Not surprisingly, this has generated a sizeable middle class. At least 400 million Chinese have lifted themselves out of poverty to enjoy a measure of affluence. So too with India, though on a smaller scale with 240 million "new consumers." There are large-ish numbers of such people in Indonesia, Brazil, Mexico, Turkey and Russia – in fact, 17 developing and three transition countries feature 1.4 billion people with a collective purchasing power greater than that of the United States. Supposing there are no more financial meltdowns of late 1990s' type, they are likely to increase their numbers by half and double their purchasing power during this decade. We are witnessing the biggest consumption boom in history.

Of course the new consumers should be enabled to enjoy their new-found affluence, provided their activities do not entrain environmental impacts with severe socio-economic repercussions. They command sufficient income to buy household appliances of many sorts, notably fridges and freezers, washing machines and air conditioners, plus television sets and videos/DVD players – all the usual items that mark the "newly arrived". They are also shifting to a diet strongly based on meat, which they enjoy every day at least instead of once a week at most. Still more importantly, they are buying cars in large numbers.

These three consumption activities have sizeable environmental impacts. First, the household appliances are almost always run off electricity

generated by fossil fuels – with all that implies for build-up of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the global atmosphere, thus bringing on climate change. Secondly, meat is increasingly raised in major measure on grain, thus putting pressure on limited irrigation water and international grain supplies. Several countries import large amounts of grain for the primary purpose of feeding livestock rather than people, even though most of those countries feature many millions of malnourished people. Second, the new consumers possess 135 million cars or one fifth of the global total, a proportion that is rising rapidly. At least one seventh of CO₂ emissions worldwide comes from passenger cars – so to this extent the entire world community has an interest in all those new cars in new consumer countries (just as the new consumer countries have an interest in the far larger numbers of cars in developed countries). Fortunately many new consumers can, if they feel inclined, purchase those cars that are more sparing in their CO₂ emissions, notably the Toyota Prius and the Honda Insight.

There are other downside repercussions of the burgeoning "car culture". In India there are an estimated five million premature deaths each year because of air pollution – up to 70% of which is due to motor vehicles.

Some 40 million people suffer the effects of asthma. Fortunately there have been major efforts to improve air quality in New Delhi, as too in Beijing and Mexico City.

Bottom line: can we persuade the new consumers to enjoy their high-flying lifestyles in sustainable fashion? A first step in that direction is to recognise that consumption patterns will inevitably change in the future, if only by force of environmental circumstance which is becoming ever more forceful. Secondly, we must try to modify consumption patterns right around the world (the new consumers are unlikely to alter their consumption until the rich-world consumers take solid steps to adapt their own consumption). Many observers believe that such patterns are set in concrete, but these may prove to be rather more malleable. For example, during a recent 20-year period, some 55 million Americans gave up smoking – a social earthquake, virtually overnight.

Most important of all is the need to establish sustainable consumption as a norm. This will not only foster far more efficient use of materials and energy. It will also seek to achieve an acceptable quality of life for all in perpetuity, and exemplify it

throughout our lifestyles. How, for instance, can we attain a better balance between work and leisure, as between income and consumption? How can we prevent yesterday's luxuries from becoming today's necessities and tomorrow's relicts? How can we make fashion sustainable and sustainability fashionable? However hard it will be to live with the profound changes required, it will not be nearly so hard as to live in a world profoundly impoverished by the environmental injuries of current consumption.

Further reading:

1. Myers, N. and J. Kent. 2004. "The New Consumers: The Influence of Affluence on the Environment", Island Press, Washington DC (available in the UK through EDS, phone 0207 240 0856).
2. Myers, N. and J. Kent, eds. 2005. "The New Gaia Atlas of Planet Management", Hamlyn, UK.

FIVE ECONOMIC SUPERPOWERS 2000-2010

Country	New consumers 2000 (millions)	Estimated new consumers 2010 (millions)	Purchasing power of new consumers 2000 (PPP\$ billions)	Estimated purchasing power of new consumers 2010 (PPP\$ billions)
China	303	615	1267	3535
India	132	210	609	1346
Brazil	75	88	641	840
Mexico	68	79	624	867
Russia	68	96	436	866
Total for five economic superpowers	646	1088	3577	7454
15 other new consumer countries	413	501	2728	3968
All 20 new consumer countries*	1059	1589	6305	11422

* In Asia the new consumer countries are: China, India, South Korea, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia. In Africa: just South Africa. In Latin America: Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia and Mexico. In Eastern Europe: Turkey, Poland, Ukraine and Russia.

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