



Action for Sustainable Development

Sustainable Production and Consumption: Fact Sheet

"Fundamental changes in the way societies produce and consume are indispensable for achieving global sustainable development", according to the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, adopted by world leaders at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development.

For this purpose, the Summit agreed to "encourage and promote the development of a 10-year framework of programmes in support of regional and national initiatives to accelerate the shift towards sustainable consumption and production to promote social and economic development".

The 15 per cent of the world's population living in high-income countries account for 56 per cent of the world's total consumption, while the poorest 40 per cent, in low-income countries, account for only 11 per cent of consumption. While most people are consuming more today — with the expansion of the world's economy in the 1990s and rising living standards in many countries — consumption for the average African household is 20 per cent less than it was 25 years ago.

But sustainable consumption is not only a matter of the equitable use of resources. If everyone in the world were to live like an average person in the high income countries, we would need 2.6 additional planets to support us all, according to the Ecological Footprint Sustainability Measure, an independent measure based on UN statistics.

Even current consumption and production levels appear to be 25 per cent higher than the earth's sustainable carrying capacity. This means that humanity is eroding the planet's natural capital at a significant rate.

There is some good news. Production and consumption in industrialized societies has been shifting from material and energy intensive sectors to services. Coupled with energy efficiency improvement, this has resulted in lower consumption of raw materials per unit of production. The European Union, for example, succeeded in achieving significant economic growth in the 1990s without significant increases in its consumption of fossil fuels. However, these gains in efficiency have been offset by an increase in the volume of goods and services consumed and discarded. More natural resources are being consumed and more pollution is generated.

Since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, new approaches have been developed to improve the sustainability of consumption and production. For example:



-
- Many governments have supplemented environmental regulations with economic incentives, such as: environmental taxes; pollution charges; tradable permits for pollution emissions and water use; deposit-refund schemes for waste management; and voluntary codes of conduct.
 - Many businesses have introduced cleaner and more eco-efficient production processes that reduce pollution and other environmental impacts while increasing profitability, through such means as eco-friendly design, packaging and labelling.
 - The public has become more aware of their responsibilities and options for sustainable consumption. In addition to more widespread practice of the three "Rs" — reduce, reuse and recycle — there is a willingness to pay more for organic and other environment-friendly products.

Key Statistics

- The annual output of the world economy grew from \$31 trillion in 1990 to \$42 trillion in 2000, compared to just \$6.2 trillion in 1950. This increase in economic activity created millions of new jobs and allowed people to consume more. For example, the number of motor vehicles in the world has increased from 630 million in 1990 to over one billion in 2000.
- Although per capita income has increased 3 per cent annually in 40 countries since 1990, more than 80 countries have per capita incomes that are lower than they were a decade ago. A fifth of the world population lives on less than a dollar a day, without the means to purchase basic necessities such as food, clean water and health care.
- World energy consumption has increased significantly since 1992 and is expected to grow at a rate of 2 per cent a year until 2020. Global consumption of fossil fuels has increased by 10 per cent from 1992 to 1999. Per capita use remains highest in developed countries, where people consumed up to 6.4 tons of oil equivalent per year, about ten times the consumption in developing countries.
- Consumers will often pay 50 to 100 per cent more for chemical- and pesticide-free produce. As a result, the organic food industry grew by more than 20 per cent annually in the 1990s in the United States, with similar growth rates in other industrialized countries.