

Millennium *Consumption* Goals: guiding the rich to contribute to sustainability

Mohan Munasinghe recently proposed a progressive development concept at the UN, that would mirror the Millennium Development Goals for the poor with a complementary set of targets for the rich, enabling them to contribute towards sustainable development.

Unsustainable patterns of consumption, production and resource exploitation have led to multiple problems threatening the future of humanity – such as poverty, resource scarcities, conflict and climate change.

The global economy, driven by consumption, already uses ecological resources equivalent to 1.3 planet earths, which is unsustainable. The 1.4 billion people in the richest 20th percentile of the world's population consume over 80% of global output – 60 times more than those in the poorest 20th percentile.¹ Meanwhile, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) seek to raise consumption levels of over 2 billion poor people. Clearly, the rich are “crowding out” the poor. Instead of viewing the affluent as a problem, a more positive outcome might result from persuading them to contribute to the solution – using the novel concept of ‘Millennium Consumption Goals’ (MCGs).

What are MCGs?

The MCGs seek to provide consumption targets designed to motivate the world's rich to consume more sustainably. MCGs for the rich would complement MDGs for the poor.

The MCG idea was recently proposed during preparations for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development 2012 (or Rio+20), in Brazil.² The MCGs would be a set of benchmarks (not necessarily mandatory), to which the more affluent could aspire. These targets would encourage a range of voluntary actions, supported by enabling government policies promoting sustainable consumption and production. Existing and planned research provide a basis for already setting both targets and policies.

Addressing underconsumption by the poor, the very first MCG should ensure that basic human needs are met worldwide. Next, addressing overconsumption by the rich, several measurable MCGs would target: GHG emissions; energy; water; land and biomass; ores and industrial minerals; construction minerals, and polluting discharges. Additional MCGs might cover: food security and agriculture; health, diet and

obesity; livelihoods and lifestyles; economic-financial-trade systems; and military expenditures.

MCG pathway

There are many advantages to a complementary MCG-based path to global sustainability.

First, they would apply worldwide, cutting across developed and developing country boundaries, and reducing the potential for deadlock due to nationalistic and regional self-interest. Second, relatively small reductions in rich peoples' material consumption (using existing technologies, laws and best practice), can even improve their well-being, while significantly lowering environmental harm and freeing up resources to alleviate poverty. Third, MCGs can be implemented using a soft, inclusive, multilevel strategy. A bottom-up approach is galvanising civil society and business to ‘act now’, involving pioneering individuals, communities, cities and firms, who are already declaring and implementing their own voluntary MCGs. MCGs often provide a meaningful ‘umbrella’ for already existing ad-hoc goals. A parallel top-down effort is pushing the MCGs forward more slowly on the UN agenda, creating a global mandate and benchmarks. The MCG concept is both fractal and subsidiary, because the basic idea remains unchanged (like a snowflake) at finer levels of detail, and effective implementation is still possible.

Fourth, rich individuals and communities could be motivated to act effectively in their own enlightened self-interest, since they are better educated, have more influence and command more resources. Fifth, MCG-MDG twinning is possible – e.g., by linking an MCG in a rich community/country with an MDG in a poor community/country. Sixth and finally, MCGs could mobilise, empower and link sustainable consumers and producers (including associated global supply chains) into a ‘sustainable cycle’. The same advertising that now promotes overconsumption and waste could be used to encourage more sustainable consumption. Over a period of time, values and habits could be changed society-wide to favour more sustainable behaviour (like the gradual change in attitudes towards smoking). MCGs would “empower the person to define meaningful consumption rather than permitting meaningless consumption to define the person.”

MCG Initiative and sustainomics

The Millennium Consumption Goals Initiative (MCGI) was launched by a broad coalition of stakeholders

called the MCG Network, to move this idea forward.³ The MCGs are a key practical tool within an overall strategy for sustainable development, which supplements ongoing initiatives like sustainable consumption and production (SCP) and green economy (GE). All these steps may be linked to a holistic, practical framework for making development more sustainable than I proposed at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, called ‘Sustainomics’. The sustainomics framework⁴ provides a set of core principles that help identify and correct unsustainable policies and practices immediately, while balancing economic, environmental and social goals, and transcending traditional thinking and introducing sustainable values especially among the youth. It would be fitting if the MCG idea became part of the agreements and programmes that emerge from UNCED 2012.

Concluding ideas

The MCGs will encourage consumers and producers to behave more sustainably without lowering their quality of life. There are many existing examples of best practice and we do not need to wait for new agreements. By acting together now on the MCGs, we will make the planet a better and safer place for all our children and grandchildren.

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This article is an updated version of one that first appeared in ‘The Island’, January 2011.⁵

References

(web links correct as of 30 September 2011)

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