

From conspicuous consumption to conspicuous accomplishment

Sustainability is the use and distribution, not scarcity, of natural resources

*By Mukul Sanwal**

The new international development framework will be universal and place people and planet at the centre. The emphasis on “people”, in addition to the “planet”, will require a focus on the social dimension of sustainable development, as choices have to be made about pathways for human wellbeing based on how countries understand themselves and the world their citizens wish to live in.

A century ago, the economist Torstein Veblen coined the term “conspicuous consumption” to characterize the materialism of newly well-to-do Americans. The term “conspicuous accomplishment” has been suggested for China’s young nouveaux riches, as the compressed time frame and memories of previous austere lifestyles are leading to behaviors and expectations different to those in industrialized societies in terms of urban spaces, social status, lifestyles and identities,¹ as well as social values that are not based on monetary, which are seen as Western, values². In India, half of the total urban population is found in towns each with a population of less than 0.5 million and “middle class” identification is based on social attitudes that are upbeat even at low level of incomes³.

China considers ‘ecological civilization’ a governing idea and national strategy for the whole society. While it aims to double 2010 GDP and per capita levels of rural and urban residents by 2050 it will cap emissions of carbon dioxide by 2030, providing a new model for other countries. The 18th Party Congress, in 2012,

incorporated in the Party Constitution the statement that “promoting ecological progress is a long term task of vital importance to the people’s well-being and China’s future”. The effort is to shift from industrialization led economic development and urbanization to a services and high technology led development and urbanization to keep within ecological limits⁴.

Urbanization as a mega-trend

Urbanization - as a social phenomenon, physical transformation of natural resources and generator of wealth - is one of the most powerful, irreversible and visible anthropogenic forces on Earth. These are social processes where environmental impacts are linked with the economies which collectively shape us just as society shapes the natural environment; they are not independent silos, as we have been considering since the Report of the Brundtland Commission in 1987.

By 1970 three-fourth of the population of industrialized countries had shifted to cities when the current production-based sustainable development framework evolved to support particular patterns of natural resource use. With the building and transport sectors responsible for two-thirds of the final energy consumption in the United States, a consumption based framework opens possibilities for achieving sustainability as 1 billion Chinese and Indians, which is more than three times the population of the United States, move into cities by 2030.

Two-third of future global growth is going to take place in Asia and the issue that must now be researched is how to manage this transformation.

Patterns, trends and drivers

The social sciences are now providing an understanding of the dynamics of the patterns, trends

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and drivers of natural resource use, ecosystem services and planetary limits.

First, differences within the group of developed and developing countries have now become as significant as those between developed and developing countries. The United States has two times the floor space per inhabitant with an energy use per square meter that is three times that in China⁵; the average citizen in the United States consumes four times more electricity than the average Chinese citizen⁶, with approximately eight vehicles in the United States for every 10 people. Two-third of the emissions in the United States come from the building and transport while only half of Japanese emissions come from these sectors, making Japan closer to China's levels of resource use than to the United States⁷.

Second, the environmental debate is being importantly recast by changing the fundamental objectives from risk management to building and sustaining the quality of lives within planetary limits. Modifications in longer term trends in consumption patterns are most effective when urbanization is complete and depend on urban design, and subsequent individual actions ⁸; in China 72% percentage of travel is completed by public transit compared with 10% in the United States, 17% in the European Union and 37% in Japan; transport emissions are the fastest rising emissions and expected to be half of global emissions in 2050. The emerging trends are significant to the extent of re-defining 'happiness', 'well-being' and 'global public goods' and building a wider sense of common identity among all peoples with each other as the possible way forward for human thriving⁹.

Third, distribution issues are now being highlighted; the key global policy issue is considered to be reducing waste and modifying consumption patterns to ensure equitable access to energy, transport and food for the emerging urban middle class¹⁰. Half of the reductions in energy use to keep within planetary limits could come from efficiency improvement¹¹, as every unit of power that is saved has a multiplier effect as it replaces three units of primary energy and their emissions if the energy is generated using fossil fuel¹². India is focusing on energy efficiency, not annual reductions in emissions of carbon dioxide, as a key response to climate change.

Fourth, very different consumption patterns of the re-emerging countries are driving the global economy now shaped by the services and knowledge economy challenging the linear path of progress and will enable Asia to jump technology cycles¹³, giving hope for moving sustainability from ideas to reality

Social science-policy interface

The International Social Science Council (ISSC) has highlighted the inseparability of social and environmental systems and problems. The '2013 World Social Science Report' of the ISSC, UNESCO and the OECD, argues that global warming is more about people than carbon emissions¹⁴. The ISSC has also launched a global research programme in 2014 on 'Transformations to Sustainability', reframing sustainable development science from understanding the Earth system and how humans interact with it to understanding the longer term trends that need to be modified for enabling the wellbeing of 9 billion people.

Issues for further consideration/key messages

New approaches to achieving sustainability are now coming from re-emerging countries as they shape their urban future:

- Designing cities to sustain a high quality of life for more people with a sustainable global footprint that considers the human and natural resources they draw on,
- Identifying longer term trends in certain consumption pattern of the middle class which should be modified for raising global standards of living while keeping within planetary limits,
- Understanding how to facilitate a broadly acceptable societal and behavioral change,
- Developing more meaningful ways of thinking about living standards than accumulation of material resources, or GDP, as a measure of prosperity,
- Supporting new forms of international cooperation that are not based on the North-South divide and rely on exchanging experiences between cities, developing knowledge networks between private sector organizations and global frameworks for sharing responsibility for the Planet and prosperity of the People.

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