

At the UN, a discussion on consumerism and its impact on the planet

IN BRIEF

- During the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, panelists discussed “Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism”
- Saying the earth is approaching its limits, they called for reconsideration of the consumer culture that stresses the acquisition of ever more material goods
- The focus should be on true prosperity and well-being

NEW YORK — One of the critical questions about humanity’s long term future is this: Can the earth support the estimated nine billion people who are likely to be alive at mid-century if everyone adopts a consumer-oriented lifestyle like Europeans or North Americans?

Many say that the answer is no, and among them is Tim Jackson, a professor of sustainable development at the University of Surrey in the United Kingdom.

“We are already outside the safe operating space of the planet we live on,” said Prof. Jackson at a panel discussion on 10 May 2010 during this year’s UN Commission on Sustainable Development.

Held at the offices of the Bahá’í International Community, the topic was “Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism.”

Prof. Jackson said a number of researchers have already concluded that humanity has already exceeded the likely limits of the earth’s capacity in terms of climate change, biodiversity and the nitrogen cycle.

“Imagine a world of nine billion people by 2050, and that all aspire to an income level the same as, say, a Western European income, with 2 percent annual growth,” said Prof. Jackson. “That just carries within it the seeds of its own destruction.”

“We are encouraged to spend money we don’t have on things we don’t need to create impressions that don’t last on people we don’t care about.”

- Prof. Tim Jackson

A member of the United Kingdom’s Sustainable Development Commission, Prof. Jackson said

Panelists at a side event during the Commission on Sustainable Development included, left to right, Duncan Hanks of the Bahá’í International Community, Tim Jackson of the University of Surrey in the United Kingdom, Jeff Barber of the Integrative Strategies Forum in the US, Luis Flores Mimica of Consumers International in Chile, and Victoria Thoresen of the Norwegian Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living.



Western consumerism uses too much energy and produces too much carbon dioxide per unit of economic growth.

What is needed, said Prof. Jackson and other panelists, is a reconsideration of the consumer culture that so relentlessly urges people to adopt a lifestyle based on the acquisition of new and more material goods.

“We are encouraged to spend money we don’t have on things we don’t need to create impressions that don’t last on people we don’t care about,” was how Prof. Jackson characterized the current culture of consumption.

“We need a better concept of prosperity, a shared prosperity, a lasting prosperity, a prosperity built around the concept of people’s capacity to flourish, within the confines of a finite planet,” said Prof. Jackson.

Other panelists voiced similar sentiments.

“Empty aspirations”

Luis Flores Mimica, a representative of Consumers International who is based in Chile, said that there are many people in the developing world who have not yet adopted the consumer-based lifestyle, which he said was largely filled with “empty aspirations.”

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- Luis Flores Mimica

“We need to help make governments in the developing world realize that there is no way they can continue to follow the path of ‘development’ as labeled that way in the 1950s,” said Mr. Mimica.

Victoria Thoresen of the Norwegian Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living said one way to help humanity make the shift to a new system of sustainable values is to recognize our essential oneness — and to consider that we are now collectively like an adolescent moving towards maturity.



Tim Jackson, a professor of sustainable development at the University of Surrey in the United Kingdom, during a video interview in advance of a panel discussion on alternatives to consumerism.

“Constructive change depends upon individuals being able to recognize spiritual principles and to identify patterns and processes of development in society,” said Ms. Thoresen, who is a Bahá’í.

Jeff Barber, executive director of Integrative Strategies Forum in the United States, said one place to start “redefining progress” is by considering the vast research about what really makes people happy. Much of that shows that material consumption does not necessarily lead to well-being.

The discussion was co-sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Permanent Mission of Sweden to the United Nations.

The issue of sustainable consumption and production patterns was one of several topics addressed at this year’s Commission on Sustainable Development, held 3-14 May 2010. Other topics addressed were transport, chemicals, waste management, and mining.

In his final report this year, the Commission Chair Luis Alberto Ferraté said that the next ten years are critical for sustainable development. He — like other governmental representatives to the Commission — stressed the importance of

international cooperation and better integration between the set of issue areas that encompass sustainable development.

“The recent series of crises have highlighted shared vulnerabilities and created a new sense of urgency,” said Mr. Ferraté, who is Minister of the Environment and Natural Resources in Guatemala. “They have underscored the need for greater international cooperation simultaneously to accelerate the pursuit of poverty eradication and the Millennium Development Goals, maintain and enhance the development momentum, and halt and reverse the mounting pressure on the Earth’s ecosystems.”

Mr. Ferraté added that this year’s themes “go to the very heart of the sustainable development challenge. They affect almost the entire range of human needs and ecological imperatives, including food security, health, gender equity, labour rights, the rights of indigenous people and local communities, biodiversity, climate change, ecological footprint, physical mobility, environmental liabilities, agricultural as well as industrial productivity, social equity, and economic growth.”