

Millennium Consumption Goals (MCG)

Primer on Millennium Consumption Goals (MCGs)

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A quick overview and introduction to the MCGs with FAQs.

WHAT ARE THE MILLENNIUM CONSUMPTION GOALS (MCGs)?

The Millennium Consumption Goals (MCGs) seek to provide consumption targets designed to motivate the world's rich to consume more sustainably. They will make human consumption and production more sustainable in economic, environment and social terms, thereby improving overall well being, reducing the burden on natural resources, freeing up resources to alleviate poverty, and ensuring intra- and inter-generational equity.^[1] MCGs for the affluent would be designed to complement the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and in no way hinder efforts to meet the basic needs of the world's poor and eradicate poverty.

The most obvious and easily measurable MCGs would target:

1. GHG emissions reduction
2. Energy use (conservation, fossil fuels, renewable energy, transport, buildings, urban planning, etc.)
3. Water use (conservation, quality, re-use, etc.)
4. Land use (urban habitats, rural land, buildings, forests, protected areas, agro-ecol. zones, biodiv, etc.)
5. Pollution and waste (air and water effluents, solid waste, toxic waste and chemicals, etc.)

Further areas might include:

6. Food security and agriculture
7. Health, diet and obesity
8. Livelihoods and lifestyles (working hours, work conditions, etc.)
9. Economic-financial systems (progressive taxation, banking reform, measuring well being, etc.)
10. Military expenditures ^[2]

[Table 1 summarizes some recently proposed MCGs.](#)

WHY DO WE NEED MCGs?

Unsustainable patterns of consumption, production and resource exploitation have led to multiple problems threatening the future of humanity – like poverty, resource scarcities, conflict and climate change.^[3] The global economy driven by consumption already uses natural resources equivalent to 1.5 planet earths, which is unsustainable.^[4] 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.^[5] 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. A business-as-usual attitude that ignores the problem will exacerbate conflict and increase the risk of global unrest. 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). The MCG approach offers the hope of a more manageable future rather than an unpredictable and undesirable outcome.

HOW DID THE MCG CONCEPT ORIGINATE?

The MCG idea was proposed formally at the January 2011 UN sessions in New York, during preparations for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, UNCSD 2012 (or Rio+20) in Brazil. [6] They are a logical outcome of the original focus on “unsustainable consumption and production” in Agenda 21 (Rio Earth Summit 1992, Chap.4.3), and more recent initiatives like the Marrakesch Process (2003) that highlighted sustainable consumption and production (SCP).

HOW WILL THE MCGs BE IMPLEMENTED?

The MCGs will be a set of benchmarks (not necessarily mandatory), to which the more affluent could aspire. These targets would encourage a combination of voluntary actions by rich consumers, supported by enabling government policies promoting sustainable consumption and production. The proposed strategy is inclusive and multi-track. A top down effort at the international level seeks to move the MCG forward on the UN agenda, including creating a mandate, setting benchmarks at the global level, and establishing an enabling implementation framework. But this process may take some time. Meanwhile, many who prefer not to wait for broad multilateral agreements at the global level are acting NOW. This bottom-up approach involves pioneering individuals, communities, organisations, firms, cities, regions and nations, who are willing to set up their own specific voluntary MCGs, monitor and implement them, and report progress.

Voluntary MCGs could be pursued by the willing, at whatever level they choose, and focusing on the goals they prefer. A sensible commitment is all that is required to make a start. For example, a city, community or company might analyse its current energy use to identify opportunities for energy saving. Then an appropriate target (say 10-25% reduction over 2-3 years) could be pledged, followed by systematic implementation and monitoring of results. An alternative target might be to increase the share of renewable energy in total energy use.

To move this idea forward, the Millennium Consumption Goals Initiative (MCGI) was launched at the UN by a broad coalition of stakeholders called the MCG Network. It is action-oriented, multi-level, pluralistic and trans-national. The MCGI is targeting the UNCSD 2012 conference to establish an international mandate for the proposal. The MCGI 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 technologies, laws or infrastructure. By acting together now on the MCGs, we will make the planet a better and safer place for our children and grandchildren.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF ADOPTING MCGs

The MCGs provide a complementary path to global sustainability

- MCGs would apply everywhere, so the idea cuts across developed and developing country boundaries, thus

reducing the potential for deadlock due to nationalistic self-interest.

- Since the rich account for over 80% of consumption and pollution, small shifts in their consumption can significantly reduce the environmental burden and free up resources to raise poor peoples' living standards. While doing so, the affluent can also maintain or improve their quality of life, using existing technologies and policies.
- MCGs lead to an inclusive, multilevel strategy, which combines both bottom up and top down approaches. They seek to influence the voluntary behaviour of affluent people at individual, community, city, enterprise, regional, and country levels. This complements the more conventional approach of relying on top-down, large scale actions (UN, government, etc.). 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.
- MCGs have the potential for quicker results, by energizing civil society and business to 'act now'. This could shift the behaviour of many high-consumption households and businesses, without relying only on government policies and long-term investments. Furthermore, rich individuals could be motivated to act more effectively in their own enlightened self-interest, since they are better educated, have more influence and enjoy better access to resources.
- MCG-MDG "twinning" is possible, by directly linking an MCG in a rich community/country with an MDG in a poor community/country
- MCGs could mobilise, empower and link sustainable consumers and producers (including associated global supply chains) into a virtuous cycle. The same advertising that now promotes over-consumption and waste could be used to encourage more sustainable consumption. Over a period of time, social values and habits could be changed to favour more sustainable behaviour (like the gradual change in attitudes towards smoking). ***Let the person define consumption rather than permitting consumption to define the person.***

HOW WILL THE MCGs FIT INTO THE BROADER FRAMEWORK OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

The MCGs are intended to be an important practical tool within an overall strategy for sustainable development, which would supplement broader, ongoing initiatives in the area of sustainable consumption and production (SCP) and the green economy (GE). These latter concepts are essential steps on the path to sustainable development, and may be linked to a holistic, practical framework for making development more sustainable called 'Sustainomics', that was proposed at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit.^[7] It would be fitting if the MCG idea became part of the agreements and programmes that emerge from UNCSD 2012, twenty years later.

The four core principles of sustainomics apply to the MCGs:

- The main goal is 'Making Development More Sustainable' (MDMS) using a step-by-step method that empowers people to take immediate action by spotting and eliminating the many existing unsustainable activities. The MCG and SCP concepts epitomise this approach.
- The three dimensions of the sustainable development triangle (economic, social and environmental) must be given balanced treatment. In the MCG context this means consumers must be empowered to make sustainable choices by equipping them with relevant product information on all three aspects, and ensuring that pricing reflects real costs.
- Thinking should transcend traditional boundaries to bring about sustainable behaviour changes in the longer

term. Replacing unsustainable values like greed with sound ethical principles, especially among the young, must go hand in hand with raising awareness across every sector of society. Trans-disciplinary analysis is essential, that includes thinking on a global scale and over long time spans.

- Full life cycle analysis is required for all products, covering the entire value chain, to identify hot spots where innovation can improve production sustainability, reform pricing, and improve labelling information.

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This article is an updated version of one that first appeared in 'The Island', January 2011. [8]

References

[1] <http://www.millenniumconsumptiongoals.org/>

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[3] Munasinghe M (2009). *Sustainable Development in Practice: Sustainomics Framework and Applications*. Cambridge University Press: London, UK. <http://www.mohanmunasinghe.com/sustainomics.cfm#2>

[4] http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/world_footprint/

[5] UNDP (1992). *Human Development Report*. Oxford Univ. Press: Oxford, UK.

[6] <http://www.eurostep.org/wcm/eurostep-weekly/1308-rich-countries-called-upon-to-take-responsibility-for-global-environmental-damage.html>

[7] <http://www.mohanmunasinghe.com/sustainomics.cfm>

[8] http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=17248

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