

**Final Report: How Much Is Enough?  
A Roundtable Discussion on Sustainable Consumption**

Wednesday, June 29, 2011  
9:30 to 12:30 at Demos  
New York, NY

**World Policy Institute** (WPI) convened a roundtable in New York on June 29th, 2011 to explore a vital question: how much is enough?

This roundtable discussion brought together a talented, highly cross-sectoral group of thirty people involved in differing ways in sustainability and consumption issues in order to foment new solutions and coalesce in fresh ways. The probing conversation that ensued explored workable, cross-disciplinary alternatives to the “more-is-better” paradigm, investigating successful movements in green living, and thinking creatively about moving these models into the policy realm.

The roundtable was introduced and moderated by WPI Senior Fellow **William Powers** who coordinates the **Redefining Prosperity** project. Experts from the corporate, policy, media, activist, private foundation, and academic worlds took part, and [a full list of participants is found at the end of this report.](#)

This thematically-organized report distills the questions, ideas, and actionable next steps that arose.

## I. Happiness

Introduced by **John de Graaf**, author, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, followed by discussion

- Unique time to begin redefining happiness, decoupling work from necessity and leisure from idleness
  - Leisure as ‘purposeful idleness’
  - Restructuring the manner in which we approach work as a five day a week, forty hour a week, full-time necessity
    - This is a natural extension of the capitalist mindset wherein more is better
    - Different models of work expectations explored in Scandinavian nations
- Moving towards real lifestyle changes
  - Americans need to relearn the ‘art’ of leisure
  - This involves a re-enchantment with the sensuous and shaping our lives/architecture/relationships to maximize opportunities to experience, interact with, and absorb the sensuous
- Question of choosing between disengaging with society or attempting to reshape it
  - Society needs to move toward the point where work and leisure are not so strictly and neatly dichotomized, there should exist natural flow between the two
  - Ultimate goal is the removal of impermeable membrane between two ‘categories’ of life
  - Problem endemic to America but perhaps spreading elsewhere (phenomena of adoption of Western culture, values, and goals in other parts of the globe)

## II. The Economy

Introduced by **Andrew Revkin**, reporter, *The New York Times*

- There exists a consensus among mainstream economists that we are moving towards an economy of quality growth and away from one of quantity growth
  - Continuing with the trend established by the last couple decades, serious economic growth will shift abroad
    - Logical extension: greenhouse gas emissions and environmental pollution will also shift to emerging nations (China consumes more resources and pollutes more than the U.S.)
- Looming question: how are other countries going to use their resources? What are the trends of consumption in emerging markets?
  - Will the developing global middle class choose to consume sustainably?
    - How do developed nations ensure developing nations advance sustainably without imposing policies/appearing hypocritical?
    - How do we ensure a smoother, more equitable global transition to quality over quantity?
    - It will be difficult to put the ‘speed brakes’ on emerging markets since we have expanded our markets so irresponsibly
    - Concept of exporting to and investing clean technology in emerging nations (a solar

panel in Kenya may be vastly more beneficial than one in Manhattan)

- Next steps: identifying actionable policy solutions
  - First strategic inquiry must be: how much is truly ‘enough’?
    - Is it 2,700 calories, happiness, revitalized communities or something else?
    - There is a need for academia to re-explore Durkheimian concept of anomie and what is causing the unraveling of community thread
    - Will technology exacerbate or mitigate this problem?
  - Policy must first target the local/municipal level building off existing models in green and sustainable living (Slow Food Conviviums, No Impact Projects, etc.)
  - Next, move towards substituting GDP as a measure of a nation’s ‘health’ with more holistic, humanistic metrics
  - Must redefine the role of the economy vis-à-vis the individual (the economy needs us, not vice-versa)
  
- Resource scarcity is the issue of the 21st century
  - In following decades, commodity prices (water and oil particularly) will spike exorbitantly by a measure of more than two standard deviations
  - How do we stop or, more reasonably, mitigate such volatility in the coming years?
    - Bottom billion will be disproportionately affected
    - Need to protect bottom billion (on which the top billion rely heavily) by investing in and exporting innovation
    - Incentivize entrepreneurs to focus efforts on developing world (again, concept of greater ‘value’ of a solar panel in Kenya rather than Manhattan)
  - Avoid mistake of searching for a silver bullet or killer apps
    - How do we move from attempting to create panaceas to promoting initiatives and technologies that already exist or are in advanced stages of development?
  
- Technology is not the be-all and end-all, but perhaps the most promising starting point
  - How do we make investing in/producing/selling clean tech profitable so that it works well within the global capitalist framework?

### III. The United States

- Global politico-economic system supported by Washington Consensus and Bretton Woods system is outdated and obsolete
  - U.S. no longer occupies the role of hegemonic stabilizer and can no longer act as the guarantor of global economic progress
  - Pax Americana in its death throes
    - What global system, if any, will arise to supplant it, as Pax Americana did Pax Britannica?

- The 2008-09 global financial meltdown led to reluctant domestic acceptance of notion that America markets are *not* the best and safest investment space
  - Emerging market debt is currently safer than U.S., European, or Japanese debt
  - Investors are still warming up the concept that America is no longer bulwark of investment but are rapidly turning more attention to BRIC nations
  - Simple argument: emerging markets have gone through their times of troubles (Mexico/Argentina in the 90s, Ireland/Portugal/Spain/Greece presently), why not us?
- Perhaps it *is* America's time to go through prolonged economic struggle
  - America is all but 'tapped out' of rampant consumerism, consumption will start shifting to other growing economies (BRIC)
  - Bottom line: discussion concerning efforts towards greater sustainability will gain increase
    - Government and military must become interested in conversation on sustainability and must take more active and visible role in the discussion

## V. Consumption

Introduced by **Cameron Tonkinwise**, Chair, Design Thinking and Sustainability, Parsons The New School for Design & **David Abram**, author, *Spell of the Sensuous*

- How do we reset the consumption paradigm to one centered on concept of nourishment?
  - There are four primary drivers of consumption: comfort, convenience, class, and credit
  - Must level existing socio-economic barriers (e.g. middle-class would benefit most from exposure to fine arts, but only elite can afford museums/theater, etc.)
  - How do we re-enchant ourselves with the world?
    - This reintroduces concept of community building, reattaching ourselves to the environment, moving towards designs that accentuate the environment and foster community activity
    - What are the things that are cutting us off from our community and how do we cut those things off from us?
    - Why do we feel so much anxiety growing up? (incessant pursuit of success/unnatural expectations)
    - In the end, what truly nourishes us?
- Need to ask basic question: why do people consume?
  - We must begin by challenging the concept that people only buy big and consume because of status
    - These things are not only products of clever messaging and advertising, but something ingrained in our psyche
  - Why do we not take better care of what we have?
    - The problem might not be that we are irrational consumers, but instead that perhaps our consuming patterns are unnatural
  - Also, why do we not move towards more collaborative consumption and shared use?

- Should we not be leasing or allowing others to borrow what we already have rather than making more? How will the internet and technology reformat our ways about thinking of consumption?
  - This system would require a paradigmatic shift in the concept of who owns what
  - Collaborative consumption would require us not only to trust each other, but to truly trust businesses as well (implications here are endless)
  - Would this detach us too much from the objects around us?

#### IV. Reframing the Debate

Introduced by **Colin Beavan**, Founder, No Impact Project

- The discussion must start at the beginning, by defining what it means to ‘use’
  - This inquiry leads directly into a discussion concerning what we want our society to look like
  - There needs to be discussion about creating a different kind of society with different values, not just a different society with improved, cleaner technology
- How we want our society to look/act and how define happiness is culturally specific: global happiness indicators may not be accurate metrics and a global paradigm shift approach will not work
  - Emerging markets cannot follow Western pattern, but they will need initial start-up capital from the West to begin developing sustainable economies
- What services pander exclusively to consumerism and how do we expose those services for what they are?
  - The challenge of business will be how to provide the ‘satisfaction’ those services provide without consumption for its sake alone being the end goal
  - These questions begin with asking how we can increase citizen power and relate citizen dialog to government and especially to business dialog
  - Part of this involves emphasizing and creating opportunities for civic engagement, which is easier to create in times of serious crisis

#### IV. Changing the System

Introduced by **Vicki Robin**, author, *Your Money or Your Life*

- First step is identifying leverage points to change the system, individuals can:
  - Tweak the dials (fine tune)
  - Restructure (push for fundamental shift)
  - Agents (replace/reengage those in power)
  - Goals (redefine priorities)
- There exists various types of dialogs and ‘shades’ of people within the system:
  - Blue people: want to ensure continuation of status quo, look for security and stability, seek to maintain the system
    - Generally uninterested in conversations concerning values
  - Orange people: looking to mold the system to increase enterprise

- Willing to modify the system in the name of innovation
- Green people: the present system is just one of many potential and acceptable forms it could take
  - Very affected by value arguments
- How do we identify a shared goal among all these types of people? Is there a shared goal at all?
  - What leverage points should be used and can be used in the United States?
  - Can we afford to continue tweaking the dials instead of restructuring?
- To have true systemic change, shared goal needs to be identified before a strategy is designed and pursued
  - Central challenge is truly making people understand the issue, not just be exposed to it occasionally
  - Talented opposition will work to deemphasize and obfuscate the issue

## VI. Conclusion

**William Powers:** What are the ideas/phrases that you will take away today?

- Bottom lines:
  - Nourishment versus consumption
  - Emphasize the positive
  - Frame the message differently
  - Question the goals of the system
  - Work towards new indicators/metrics of nation's health
  - Aspiration-based rather than material/capital-based behavior
  - Reciprocity with the environment
  - "Bread & Roses"
  - Technology as a reflection of values
  - Love as basis of all
  - Shift from quantity to quality
  - Change the way we learn
  - Invest in a multi-generational movement
- Next steps:
  - Exchange contact information to stay connected as a group
  - Build community networks
  - Utilize resources/manpower at universities
  - Redefine role of corporate social responsibility in the workplace
  - Reemphasize the importance of values
  - Substitute old story with new 'aspiration' story
  - Emphasize long-term over short-term goals
  - Focus on sustainable infrastructure
  - Centering story-telling on the personal level

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### Participants List:

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