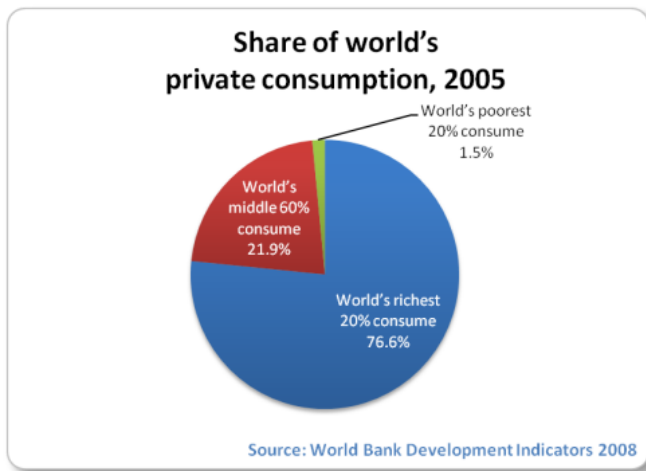


Consumption and Consumerism

by Anup Shah

Global inequality in consumption, while reducing, is still high. Using latest figures available, in 2005, the wealthiest 20% of the world accounted for 76% of total private consumption.

The poorest fifth just 1, 5%. The poorest 10% accounted for just 0,5% and the wealthiest 10% accounted for 59% of all the consumption

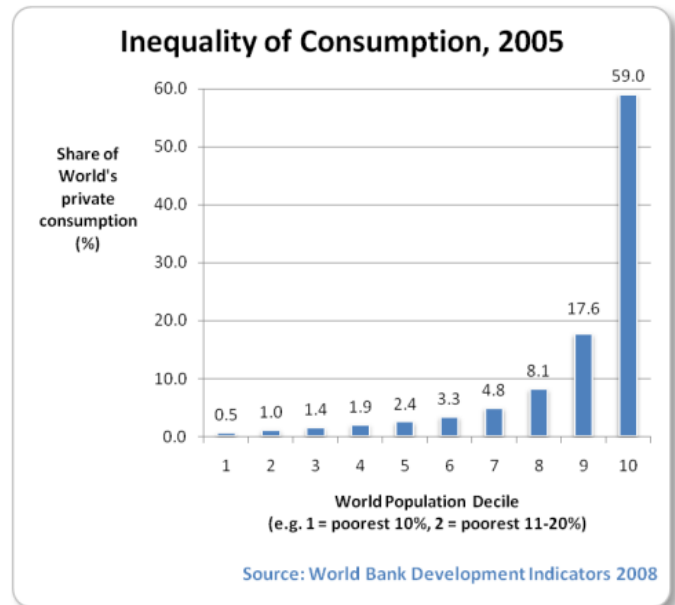


Today's consumption is undermining the environmental resource base. It is exacerbating inequalities. And the dynamics of the consumption-poverty-inequality-environment nexus are accelerating. If the trends continue without change — not redistributing from high-income to low-income consumers, not shifting from polluting to cleaner goods and production technologies, not promoting goods that empower poor producers, not shifting priority from consumption for conspicuous display to meeting basic needs — today's problems of consumption and human development will worsen.

... The real issue is not consumption itself but its patterns and effects.

... Inequalities in consumption are stark. Globally, the 20% of the world's people in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures — the poorest 20% a minuscule 1.3%. More specifically, the richest fifth:

- Consume 45% of all meat and fish, the poorest fifth 5%
- Consume 58% of total energy, the poorest fifth less than 4%
- Have 74% of all telephone lines, the poorest fifth 1.5%
- Consume 84% of all paper, the poorest fifth 1.1%
- Own 87% of the world's vehicle fleet, the poorest fifth less than 1%



Runaway growth in consumption in the past 50 years is putting strains on the environment never before seen.

As a few developing countries continue to develop and help make the numbers show a narrowing gap, there are at least two further issues:

- Generalized figures hide extreme poverty and inequality of consumption on the whole (for example, between 1995 and 2005, the inequality in consumption for the poorest fifth of humanity has hardly changed)
- If emerging nations follow the same path as today's rich countries, their consumption patterns will also be damaging to the environment

And consider the following, reflecting world priorities:

Global Priority	\$U.S. Billions
Cosmetics in the United States	8
Ice cream in Europe	11
Perfumes in Europe and the United States	12
Pet foods in Europe and the United States	17
Business entertainment in Japan	35
Cigarettes in Europe	50
Alcoholic drinks in Europe	105
Narcotics drugs in the world	400
Military spending in the world	780

And compare that to what was estimated as additional costs to achieve universal access to basic social services in all developing countries

Global Priority	\$U.S. Billions
Basic education for all	6
Water and sanitation for all	9
Reproductive health for all women	12
Basic health and nutrition	13

We consume a variety of resources and products today having moved beyond basic needs to include luxury items and technological innovations to try to improve efficiency. Such consumption beyond minimal and basic needs is not necessarily a bad thing in and of itself, as throughout history we have always sought to find ways to make our lives a bit easier to live.

Extracted from <http://www.globalissues.org/issue/235/consumption-and-consumerism>