

# Global Issues and Sustainable Solutions

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Join us on Wednesdays and Fridays for Skills for Everyday Living, a series that goes beyond the classroom to prepare students for the many challenges of the real world. Our current topic is **Global Issues and Sustainable Solutions**, developed by *Facing the Future*. Series ends June 13.

*"We buy a wastebasket and take it home in a plastic bag. Then we take the wastebasket out of the bag, and put the bag in the wastebasket."*

— Lily Tomlin, comedian

## Spending Spree

Picture all the things in your home, all the things in your neighbor's home and in your whole neighborhood. Here in the United States, many of us are used to having a lot of stuff. We don't even need very much money to be able to buy a lot of things or eat as much as we want. It wasn't always this way.

This purchase of goods and services is often called "consumption." In the last century, world consumption multiplied 16-fold, from \$1.5 trillion in 1900 to \$24 trillion in 1998.<sup>1</sup> During the same period, world population quadrupled; that means that overall consumption has increased four times as much as population has. People are buying a lot more stuff!

For hundreds of millions of people, increased consumption has meant more than just being able to meet their basic needs for food, water and shelter. A century ago, people could hardly have imagined many of the things we now take for granted, like shopping malls, airplanes and houses with electricity.

Not everyone has been part of the spending spree. Over two billion people in the world survive on less than \$2 a day. People living in extreme poverty need to *increase* their consumption in order to meet their basic needs for survival.

### Consumption Costs

Even in wealthier countries, the rise in consumption has not been all good or equal for everyone. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, most of

what we buy ends up in landfills. Manufacturing and transporting all the things we purchase pollutes the air, water and soil with toxic chemicals, and releases greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change. Resources are being used up faster than they can renew themselves — which means we are losing many forests, natural areas and species of plants and animals.

While the wealthiest global citizens are the main consumers, the environmental damage from this consumption falls most severely on the poor. In both developed and developing countries, poor people are the ones most exposed to pollution, hazardous wastes, droughts, floods and deforestation. For example, landfills and power plants are usually located closer to poor people than to their wealthier neighbors.

The cycle of consumption is putting a strain on many people as well as the environment. In the United States, an increasing number of people are overweight, overworked and just plain stressed. We have more material goods but less leisure time because we are so busy making the money we need to support our lifestyle — and to buy more stuff!

### Does This Mean We Have to Stop Consuming?

Of course not! But if we want a sustainable planet — one where future generations can enjoy plenty of resources and a healthy environment — we have to think about what and how we are consuming. One place to start is by not buying things we don't need, and by giving things we don't use to others who might need them. We can buy things that are reused or recycled (and make sure to reuse and recycle them when we don't want them anymore) and shop from companies that are committed to the health and well-being of their employees and the environment.

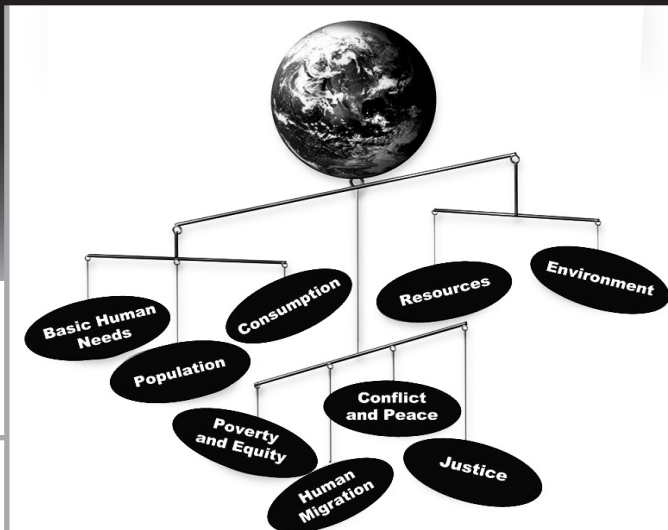
### It's Up to All of Us

Governments can help ensure that the price of a product includes the environmental cost of producing and disposing of it. They can do this by providing economic rewards to companies that use renewable energy, efficient technology and clean production. Governments can also require companies to put labels on products to inform consumers about their lifecycle (how they were created and how people can dispose of them) and require companies to take back products at the end of their useful life. Some businesses are creating alternatives to products that eventually end up as waste, by making products out of components that can be reused again and again.

Governments can even affect our consumption of plastic bags. When we buy a plastic bag in the United States, we don't pay for its disposal. This changed in Ireland, when their government put a tax on plastic bags in 2002. Now almost nobody uses plastic bags in Ireland. Other countries and cities around the world have outlawed plastic bags entirely.

Ultimately, it's up to us to tell governments and businesses what we like, and the kind of information we want about the products we buy. What about the products you buy — how much do you know about them? Do they make you healthier and happier? How do they affect our environment? Would you be willing to pay more for them if you had to pay their true cost — including their disposal or recycling?

<sup>1</sup> *United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Report 1998,"* <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr1998/>.



*Like a mobile, global issues are interconnected. The solutions to global issues are often interconnected as well.*

## Activity

- Go to [www.newdream.org/walletbuddy.pdf](http://www.newdream.org/walletbuddy.pdf) and print out, cut and fold up "The New American Dream Wallet Buddy." Read the 13 questions on the buddy and highlight the questions that you think are most important to consider when purchasing a new item. The next time you are about to buy something, first pull out your wallet buddy and answer the questions you highlighted.

## Take Action!

- Visit [www.facingthefuture.org](http://www.facingthefuture.org) and click on *Fast Facts & Quick Actions* under *Latest News from Facing the Future*. Click on *Consumption*, then choose one quick action. Use what you learn to encourage your friends and family to make consumption choices they feel good about.