

Globalization, Consumerism and Sustainability in the East Asian Context

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As a member of the Y family taking part in YWCA activities in various ways for almost 50 years since I joined the Student YWCA, I am honored to meet the leaders of YMCA from 4 countries participating in this workshop of the Asia Alliance of YMCAs on "Globalization, Consumerism and Sustainability."

In particular, we share the same religious and cultural background, that is, Christianity, Confucianism and Chinese characters, so our ways of thought and life styles are similar. Moreover, we all feel it inconvenient to communicate in English, which may be another similarity among us.

Language is not only a tool of communication, but also it influences the structure of thinking deeply. That may be one of the reasons why it is not easy to understand each other in international conferences held by international organizations such as the UN, i.e., inconvenience in language and differences in the way of thinking. Accordingly, sometimes the representatives from East Asia need a pre-conference.

Fortunately, I expect we will not have to suffer from differences in our ways of thinking in this workshop even though we cannot help using English as a common language. In conferences bringing together the East and the West, it has been very hard to come to an agreement on the issue of sustainable consumption, as severe disagreement between the South and the North makes it difficult to narrow the gap as far as this matter is concerned. This shows the reality that the globe is one but the world is not.

I hope that we can make this workshop an occasion to turn our life style the life style of East Asians, who originally considered frugality virtuous, but later adopted the consumptive life style infiltrated from the West in the wave of globalization into one of sustainable consumption, and thus contribute to conserving the global environment.

I. The approaching end of a millenium

The coming year 2000, the opening of another millenium, will give us a chance to reflect on the past and to prepare a new starting point. We who live today, as the generation bridging two centuries, are responsible for deciding how to close the 20th century and how to open the 21st century.

British historian Eric Hobsbom warns, "Humankind will fail if it tries construct the third millenium upon the extension of the past and the present."

The past and the present are an era stained by human exploitation of nature, western oppression of the third world, male restriction of female and the suppression of the individual by state power. Debaters on the current spreading social crisis agree that its symptoms arise from the aftermath of the growth-centered western "modernization."

It is fortunate that the entire world is now engaging in crisis diagnosis and alternative plans to get through modern times and reach the end of the century securely, though they may be uncertain about the outcome. Among others, the discussion about how to overcome the crisis of the ecosystem, beyond merely protecting earth's environment, is worthy of notice.

There is also an active movement suggesting oriental ideas such as Taoism as alternatives to the collapsing occidental civilization. I consider it especially important that recognition is growing about how best to conserve the earth's environment, and the western idea of the natural ecosystem as the object of development is being replaced by the eastern idea that values harmony with nature.

The world expects the coming 100 years to be:

- ①the century of global politics, global economy and global environment without national boundaries, with the world's people becoming one family in the 'global village' due to globalization and informatization.
- ②the century of localization and increased influence by social organizations, contrary to weakening national sovereignty.
- ③the century of environment, when people consider the quality of life more important than ever, while the 20th century could be called the century of economy.

The current era is the turning point when the old order of the world reaches its limits and collapses, and accordingly, the new world order is quickens. In the 21st century, a turning point of history, humankind's most important task is "conservation of the global environment", and the most crucial part of that task is "sustainable consumption."

II. The coming age of global environment.

The environmental problem is the exhaustion of the earth's resources and the paralysis of its self-purification capacity.

The primary cause is the improper production and consumption patterns of human beings for the past 200 years.

The phenomenon of global destruction is amplified by mass production, mass consumption and mass waste disposal, and in addition, an explosive increase in population (UNFPA report, on World Population Day, July 11, 1998: by June 16, 1999, the world population will be 6 billion. The current world population is 5.8 billion, including 3.5 billion Asians), urbanization (by 2010, 50% of the world population will live in urban areas) and an extreme gap between the rich and the poor.

No generation in history has consumed more of the earth's resources than the present one. Consumption of goods and services continues to grow throughout the industrialized world, and in the newly industrializing countries, this presents an enormous threat for the future. (Alan Thein Durning, 1992)

We can divide today's world environmental problems into two kinds. One is the problem of industrial pollution and the other is the problem of global environment. The former is a local and transitory phenomenon caused by specific activities and easier to rectify, while the latter transcends all boundaries, influences not only present but also future generations, and affects the destiny of humankind.

In the case of industrial pollution, it is clear that injurer = enterprise and sufferer = local people. In the case of the global environment problem, however, all people are injurers, sufferers and conservators at the same time.

There can be various ways to overcome the environmental crisis confronted by humankind. Most importantly there should be radical changes in the current generation's production and consumption patterns. That is because environmental problem is rooted in a society that is constructed upon the pursuit of profits and that considers consumption a virtue. More seems never to be enough. But if we are to achieve sustainable and rewarding lives, we have to understand what the earth can sustain and when enough is enough. Unless we do so, all the other efforts to avert environmental crisis will fail.

Because all human beings are pursuing the standard of living now enjoyed by the 20% of the world population who consume 80% of the global resources, we are paying dear price today. Forests, soil, water, air and climate are exhausted or destroyed to provide environmental amenities. As it happens, all of us here are from those consumptive countries. (World Watch Institute classification in 1992: indigent level whose income is under \$750 a year: 1.1 billion; middle level whose income is under \$7500 a year: 3.3 billion, consumptive level whose income is over \$7500 a year: 1.1 billion).

We have entered the era of global environment. This means that the environmental problem not only exceeds national boundaries but also forces us to find its solution from the perspective of the entire globe.

The problem we should pay special attention to is the fluctuation of food, energy and water in Asia, forecast in the 21st century. In the case of the fluctuation of food, this forecast assumes that China, with the largest population in the world, will become a food-importing country, according to Lester Brown, director of the U.S. World Watch Institute. Considering the tremendous flood attacking China nowadays, such a prediction could be realized much sooner.

In the case of energy, the estimated demand for energy in East Asia will form 28% of the demand worldwide. It will go up almost twofold compared with the current demand, in spite of the economic crisis in Asia.

In the case of water, the UN warns that it will become a strategic resource more important than petroleum in the 21st century. According to a report published by UN last year, more than 65% of the world's population will suffer from "water supply stress" in 2025.

We may blame the rapid increase of water consumption, compared to the limited water resources on the increase in population, the expansion of urban areas and the injudicious destruction of forests. Primeval forest in Asia has decreased by 50% in the 20th century, and FAO points out that water pollution in Japan, Korea and Taiwan has been accelerated due to rapid urbanization and environmental destruction. We cannot settle these tough problems without radical changes in our patterns of production and consumption. To realize "sustainable consumption", we need to carry out a movement for sustainable consumption and production. This is the task that YMCAs in the East Asian region have to should choose as a program priority.

III. The urgency of the movement for sustainable consumption and production

"Agenda 21", adopted at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992, is a plan of action for planetary survival.

Chapter 4 of Agenda 21 places strong emphasis on changing the present production and consumption patterns. It is concerned primarily with changes in unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, and values that encourage sustainable consumption patterns and life styles, particularly in countries like ours where 20% of the world's population consumes 80% of its resources.

"Rio + 5", the UN Special General Meeting on the environment, held June 23 ~ 27, 1992 in New York, pointed out the 4th chapter of Agenda 21 as the action plan least implemented during the 5 years following the Rio conference. There is no progress enforcing the action plan.

The Earth Summit was perhaps the most important meeting ever to take place on the surface of this earth. But even more important than the Earth Summit is what happens in the years following.

Maurice Strong, UNCED Secretary General, said right after the Rio Summit, "But now we must move off into the trenches where the real work of saving our earth must take place. We don't have to go to distant frontiers to fight this battle for the earth we fight where we are, in our homes, and in our jobs and communities, in

our own lives. It is now the time to recommit ourselves to the task that is just beginning: the task of saving our planet for our children and our grandchildren and all who follow us on this beautiful speckle in our cosmos that we call earth."

The improvement of the global environment remains unachieved, notwithstanding global citizens' growing environmental consciousness because that consciousness is not translated into taking action. The reason is that practice implies some inconvenience and difficulty, and we do not have strong enough will power to endure the difficulty.

In other words, it is not easy for one individual alone to change behavior dependent on the affluence and convenience that began after World War II, into a life of sustainable consumption. This is the reason why the action programs must be carried out by movement organizations like YMCAs.

In the 21st century, the century of environment, humankind will call for the construction of sustainable society based on community spirit, where people live together according to a structure of sustainable consumption, in addition to enjoying environmental amenities. This will not happen until every global citizen makes efforts on his/her own. It will become possible through everyone's practice of an environment-friendly life-style. The culture of sustainable consumption, as the new cultural movement for life, should be expanded by YMCAs in the East Asian region first, and then to the world.

The conservation of global environment should be practiced, not only spoken about, but put into action, and in so doing the efforts of YMCAs in East Asia will set a good example for this movement.

IV. Sustainable life style of consumption (green life style)

G. H. Brundtland presented 5 tasks for sustainable consumption in an international academic conference on sustainable consumption held in Oslo, Norway in 1994.

- ①Development of environmental technology and green products (considering durability, reusability, etc.)
- ②Restraint in using non-renewable resources (such as fossil fuel, etc.)
- ③Practice of polluter-pays principle
- ④Establishment of environment-friendly transit systems (promotion of mass transportation)
- ⑤Reduction of volume of waste (curtailment of consumption standard, reusing, recycling, etc.)

The most crucial strategies are changing to environmental-friendly patterns of production and consumption and establishing consumption standards that require consuming less and disposing less. The concrete ways to live such a life should be developed and proliferated.

An example of eco-life:

One example could be "eco-checking" one's own daily life: checking to what extent one economizes on energy and water, reduces of waste, re-cycles and re-uses

resources, uses mass transportation and controls consumption. A green consumption life begins with the purchase of goods. Consider whether the product is really needed, durable, repairable, recyclable and not a source of pollution, and at the same time, inquire about the process of extracting the raw materials, production, use and disposal. In the case of food, inquire how it is produced, processed and distributed.

Green consumers give away their unused things to people who need them. In many countries, they run thrift shops for reuse of household stuffs and the raising of funds for charity works. In Korea, due to the suffering under the financial crisis since last December, reuse movements such as thrift shops and flea markets have been spreading fast these days. The characteristic of dislike of using goods previously used by others, widely shown in East Asian countries, seems to be fading away.

Instead of possessing goods that are not used frequently, green consumers rent or purchase cooperatively among their neighbors. When they dispose of goods, they collect the recyclables separately, and buy recycled goods without considering their quality or appearance, even if they pay more. To live an environmentally benign life, we need such information. In a number of western countries, green consumers' guide books have been published and become bestsellers long before.

The life of sustainable consumption minimizing material consumption is important. It is the style of consumption not only for the conservation of the global environment but also for tackling the financial crisis now pervading all of Asia.

V. Sustainable production patterns (green production patterns)

Sustainable production should be ahead of sustainable consumption. The method of Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) has been applied to sustainable production. LCA means considering environment-friendliness, from the obtaining of raw materials to production, distribution, consumption, reuse or recycling and disposal.

Quality certification systems for those products so processed have been developed and are in common use all over the world, e.g. Green Seal of the USA, Blue Angel of Germany, Eco Mark of Japan, Environmental Mark of Korea, etc.

As "environment-friendly industry", having been generalized from the late 1980s to 1990s, is considered as an industry having potential for growth, the production of green products and the development of green technology are on their way.

The environmental industry market is widening, even though it seems to be temporarily shrinking due to the financial depression now confronted by the entire world. This proves that the environmental consciousness of the people is taking deep root.

Environmental industry has developed in two forms, alternating between "pollution preventing industry" and "resource saving industry" according to the time and situation, and widening its boundaries. One example is environment-friendly industry, and another is a new industry called "Re" industry. "Re" industry, name from the first two letters of repair, reuse, recycle, refill, redesign, reform, rebuy, etc. In short,

"Re" industry means the industry of production maximizing the life span of products and saving or reusing resources.

We live in an era when sustainable consumers' demands sustainable production. The changes of values and consumption styles of users transform the style of production of suppliers.

VI. The role of YMCA in sustainable consumption movement

The theme of the 2nd international meeting of CIVICUS, the summit organization of world civil organizations, held in Budapest, Hungary, in September 1997, was "Globalization and Civil Society." The worldwide stream of discussion in this field is leading the 21st century to the Era of Citizens.

Civil society refers to citizens' organizations newly rising according to the weakening of the role of their state in the globalizing era. Actors in the social administration system consist of government (the public sector), enterprises (the private sector) and civil society (the third sector). Their relationship is one of democratic participation, being self-controlling, mutually supplementing and mutually checking. When the partnership among them is established well, the society can be rebirthed as a sustainable, self-governing one a community enjoying environmental abundance. There is no need to explain further the necessity of civil society and civil movement in the current world order. Civil movement plays the most important role in creating the trend of sustainable consumption to save the earth.

Among the various civil movements, the YMCA as an NGO is the most appropriate one to take a major role in this movement, because YMCAs are the pioneers in civil movement around the world, known as an international community movement of members, youth and volunteers in the Christian ecumenical spirit.

In Korea, the YMCA is a well-known and highly respected civil movement. It possesses well-established and diverse experience, expertise and capacity in fields which are needed in accomplishing all of the objectives of sustainable consumption. The YMCA is able to call for broader participation by interaction with YMCAs around the world. Its achievements, public confidence, morality, organizing abilities, leadership and the influence accumulated by its members and leaders' efforts since foundation have gained the public trust. I think all the YMCAs in the East Asia have obtained the same appraisal as the Korea YMCA. If East Asian YMCAs commit their accumulated organizational assets to recovering the world human community and conserving the global environment, they can open the way to a new paradigm achieving ecological synthesis, I believe.

It is clear that our global environment has reached a desperate situation. Crisis, however, is chance at the same time. The current environmental crisis is the chance for us to repent of our life style which is based on anthropocentric greediness and to liberate all creatures including human beings. YMCAs should make use of this opportunity as the chance to construct a sustainable society.

VII. Examples of programs for sustainable consumption

①Eco-ShopMovement

Seoul YMCA calls this movement the Green Shop Movement. In Korea, the *A-Na-Ba-Da* movement has spread rapidly nowadays. The *A-Na-Ba-Da* movement is a movement encouraging saving, sharing, exchanging and reusing, and its name is made with the first letter of those 4 goals in Korean.

This movement includes the programs of cloth bank, passing on of school uniforms, consignment sale, joint purchase, rental shops, village market, flea market and barter market (daily commodities, toys, stationery and books, etc.).

The original intention of the Eco-Shop movement is to have things once produced, be used by those who need them as long as they are usable. It prevents waste of natural resources, conserves the environment and reduces economic losses.

Seoul YMCA chose this movement as a program priority in '97 considering it as an action movement to save environment and economy together, and as a result, shops have expanded to 38 places in the period of a few months.

Every local government in Korea is running a recycling center as one of the policies to minimize the amount of waste we are generating.

Groups of women other than environmental movement organizations are running a number of thrift shops and flea markets to help prudent housewives overcome IMF financial crisis, especially the families of people who are thrown out of work.

We never expected this movement to spread in this manner because in Korea markets are filled with cheap goods and people are not used to choosing the second hand goods. In spite of these circumstances, the reusing atmosphere has come into fashion due to the rising environmental consciousness of consumers and the influence of the IMF financial crisis that suddenly attacked Korea last December.

OXFAM's movement of second-hand shops, started in Great Britain in 1942 as a charity service movement to help Greece, occupied by Nazis during the Second World War, has grown to have 853 shops as of 1993, and has been established as a regular commercial operation in the western world.

The reusing movement, as a changing of life-style campaign, has helped fix the sustainable consumption pattern today in our society. In Mannheim, Germany, one of the environmentally developed countries, very recently an environmental department store has been opened. Its catch-phrase is 'We're selling a Green Future'. It provides everything including one-stop shopping, for an environment-friendly life.

Eco shops, not only selling necessities at low prices, but also providing environmental information and education, function as a center of the movement to make sustainable society.

②FoodBankMovement

This movement collects food stuffs from groceries, producers, processors, wholesalers, retail dealers, hotels, bakeries, restaurants, etc., and provides the collected food stuffs to facilities, groups, and homes such as orphanages, old people's homes and jobless

peoples' places. This movement is run by volunteer organizations such as social welfare agencies, religious bodies and social organizations.

"Second Harvest", one of the typical food banks in the USA, was developed during the financial crisis in the late 1970s to help the poor while the government could not reach out its hands to them because of the financial shortages.

In Korea, this movement is on the way in 37 regions at present, started by YMCA, YWCA and MBC TV last May, and encouraged by the Ministry of Health and Welfare.

The metropolitan government of Seoul also started this movement with motives different from those of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. It has been researched and examined as environmental policy, aimed at reducing food waste, the most troublesome waste to manage. Food wasted in Korea costs 8 trillion won (US\$ 7.7 billion) annually.

This movement aims to minimize environmental pollution, seeks development of welfare, and contributes to social synthesis by strengthening awareness of social solidarity and sustainable society.

③Eco-Family Movement

The Eco-Family Movement is an environment-friendly life movement leading to changes in the life attitudes of individuals, who practice the "eco-checking" life style in the family. The participating family members take up issues such as waste, water, energy, transportation, etc., during a six-month term. Those who complete the eco-family program, are presented with "Global Citizenship" by the UNEP which is supporting this movement worldwide.

The Eco-Family Movement is a program of Global Action Plan for the Earth (GAP). If you would like to know more about this you may inquire at the GAP of Korea headquarters (Tel: 02-744-3964, Address: Korea Christian Academy, Korea Social Education Institute, Dongsung-Dong, Chongro-Ku, Seoul 110510, Korea). It is a sustainable social movement revitalizing community awareness which has dissolved due to the urbanizing process.

VIII. Globalization and sustainable consumption

I would like to conclude by discussing the relationship between globalization and sustainable consumption.

Globalization refers to the phenomenon of the political, cultural and environmental integration of the world into a single community as a result of active cross-border exchanges of people, goods and information, which has intensified competition as well as international cooperation and division of labor. Globalization is the process of the world's becoming a single unit. The time-space compression of the world, through the medium of technological advancement, business activities of global corporations and spread of common culture, is accelerating globalization.

"In the midst of globalization the thoughts and behavior of global citizens are creating a third culture, a culture that is neither uniquely of their own nor of others' yet the mixture of both," says Myung-Jae Cho.

The "third culture" refers to the process of the unique, separate and asynchronous life styles of different parts of the globe transforming into a globally continuous, synchronous life style. The synchronization of life styles is accompanied by rapid cross-border movement of materials, products and information as well as environmental factors.

This trend has led to a shift in consumption patterns in East Asia, from frugal consumption to massive consumption. In other words, East Asia has adopted an unsustainable consumption pattern which damages the earth's ability to sustain itself. What is so disturbing about this problem is that the people around the world are following the American life style, which recognizes no value greater than the pleasure of consumption, that is, there is no concept of over-consumption. In order for the entire world population to keep the American life style there must be at least ten earths. But we only have one earth.

The demise of socialism in the late 1980's has transformed the world into a single capitalist system and the unique feature of this "global capitalism" is that the entire process of capital circulation from production, distribution, sales and consumption to disposal of goods, is being expanded globally and at the same time being integrated. As a result, today's economic activities, ranging from production to distribution, are taking place through an organized network which connects families, corporations, races and nations into a single global community. Due to this globalization of the product chain, from production to distribution, the products that are not traded in the international market cannot be said to belong to any particular country.

The impact of globalization on our daily lives is that we cannot, on our own, provide ourselves with the food we eat or the clothes we wear, not to mention medical supplies, daily necessities and means of transportation. But with dollars, these things are easily purchased. In today's world where countries have lost their self-sufficiency, the lack of dollars will quickly plunge a country into famine. Furthermore, it goes without saying that the consumption pattern in today's world, where citizens from all parts of the world use a single, global market, has an environmental impact incomparably greater than that of the consumption pattern in the past, when regional communities were able to provide for themselves. This explains why the importance of localization is being stressed along with the significance of globalization, namely, to complement the shortcomings of globalization. The global issue of environment must be addressed globally. That means that the entire global population must come together. We must remember that the slogan "Think Globally, Plan Regionally, Act Locally!" derives from the belief that no matter how grand and complicated environmental problems are, the key to their solution lies in the actions of each individual.

Sustainable consumption is only possible if we produce less, consume less and throw away less. Bringing down one's consumption level is by no means easy. However, it can be done when it is done together.

I hope that this workshop will serve as an occasion to build a united front among the countries in East Asia to establish sustainable consumption patterns in the region, to bring about changes in the production and consumption patterns called for in Chapter 4 of UN Agenda 21, and to contribute to the preservation of the global environment.