

**North American Sustainable Consumption Alliance Planning Group:
Proceedings from the First Meeting**
Lowell, Massachusetts
October 11-12, 2001

On October 11-12, 2001, the Lowell Center for Sustainable Production at the University of Massachusetts Lowell hosted the inaugural meeting of the North American Sustainable Consumption Alliance planning group. The objective of the meeting was to bring together key people who are actively involved in promoting sustainable consumption in order to begin developing a plan for working together more collaboratively. These proceedings summarize the discussions and outcomes from that meeting.

I. Participants and Sponsors

Participating organizations included: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Environment Canada, SEMARNAT (Mexico's federal environmental agency), Global Action Plan, Consumers Union, Green Seal, Integrative Strategies Forum, Center for A New American Dream, University of Sonora (Mexico), RAJY (Youth Environmental Network of the Yucatan), Canadian Centre for Pollution Prevention, and the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives. Appendix A provides contact information for all of the participants.

Organizations that wanted to participate in the October meeting but were not able to send representatives include: the United Nations Environment Programme, Los Alamos National Laboratory, the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, the Centre for Sustainability Studies at the University of Xalapa (Mexico), the Toronto Environmental Alliance, and the Washington Toxics Coalition.

Support for the meeting was provided by: the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Los Alamos National Laboratory, the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, Environment Canada, SEMARNAT, and the Lowell Center for Sustainable Production.

II. Background

Lowell Center staff opened the meeting with a short history of the Lowell Center's interest in sustainable consumption and its motivation for hosting the meeting. They briefly described UNEP's global initiative to organize and support sustainable consumption roundtables in different parts of the world, efforts which are intended to both build regional infrastructures for addressing sustainable consumption and collect information to provide as input into the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio+10). They also summarized the Lowell Center's discussions with UNEP about catalyzing the formation in North America of a sustainable consumption network that could ultimately interact with UNEP-sponsored roundtables elsewhere.

III. Discussion of the Term “Sustainable Consumption”

Participants engaged in a brief discussion of what is meant by the term “sustainable consumption.” This discussion was deemed necessary to draw out the broad range of participants’ views of sustainable consumption but everyone agreed that it should be kept short to avoid getting mired in differences of emphasis.

The Bruntland Commission definition of “sustainable consumption” was offered as a starting point for discussion: “Sustainable Consumption is the use of services and products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of Future Generations.” After amending the language slightly (by changing “services and products” to “services and *related* products”), participants generally accepted this statement as a suitable working definition for the meeting.

Participants identified a range of issues that the term “sustainable consumption” may or should evoke. Their comments included the following:

- There is a perception that “consumption” is related to affluence and is therefore a Northern issue.
- “Sustainable” means “enough to get by on.” Many people have trouble distinguishing “need” versus “want.” Many of the things people do not want to “sacrifice” are things that they did without for so long.
- Everyone’s a consumer: individuals, governments, businesses.
- Eco-efficiency alone is not enough. It is perverse to produce an eco-efficient product that is not necessary while at the same time increasing the consumption of that product and thereby increasing the overall environmental impact.
- The cost of labor plays an important role in determining whether to throw away or repair a product (different patterns in U.S./Canada vs. Mexico). In general, tax systems encourage labor conservation, not materials conservation.
- We are a society lulled to sleep; our community values are being driven over by a culture of affluence. We need to decide if there’s anything wrong with a culture in which every 16 year old has a cell phone, or even more than one.
- We need to hold corporations responsible for their products, but a global economy means that there are more corporations to track. We must pay more attention to investment decisions and distribution issues (marketing and selling).
- In the economic aftermath of September 11, we need to find ways to change consumption patterns without hurting our most vulnerable populations.

IV. Small Group Discussion: National Visions

One of the goals of the meeting was to come up with a common North American vision for sustainable consumption. Any such vision, however, will have to build upon (or at least be compatible with) each country's own national sustainable consumption vision.

In order to lay the groundwork for a discussion of a common North American vision, participants were asked to group themselves according to nationality and discuss the following five questions: Where do we as a country want to be? (vision) Where are we in the process of getting there? (successes) How do we get there? (tools and mechanisms) What partners and resources will help us get there? (needs) Where do we need greater collaboration? (focus areas) This exercise had two objectives: (1) to help participants articulate their vision of sustainable consumption for their country, and (2) to highlight for participants some of the similarities and differences among the visions of sustainable consumption in the three countries.

Lowell Center staff served as facilitators and recorders for each of the three small groups' discussions. Appendix B provides raw data from flip charts on which Lowell Center staff recorded each country group's discussion. This section summarizes the data from these discussions. (Note: The raw data from each of the three groups reflects a collection of diverse viewpoints expressed during a brainstorming exercise rather than the official stance of any participating agency or organization. Inclusion of a statement in this summary does not imply consensus agreement nor endorsement by any particular meeting participant.)

CANADA

- **Vision:** Where you want to be depends on who you are (proactive vision/"fix it if it's broken" versus reactive actions/"don't fix it if it works"). Canada is both blessed and cursed with an abundance of natural resources and space. Affluence has lulled us into inaction. The image of Canada as a place of wild open spaces and resource wealth conflicts with the reality of a highly urbanized population concentrated in a few large urban conglomerations.
- **Successes to date:** Successes include: industrial Pollution Prevention; local initiatives, particularly municipal initiatives and the work of the Canadian Federation of Municipalities; and making the link between health and the environment. Qualified successes include gathering information about sustainable options. Recent events show signs that the core culture is slowly changing and has the potential for further change. However, much of the change to date has been driven by economic considerations as opposed to a campaign for sustainability. Furthermore, environmental awareness does not always translate to action. We have seen "pockets" of leadership and activity but we need a larger political vision.

- **Tools and mechanisms for achieving vision:** Education and information sharing are crucial. We need to articulate a vision in clear and practical terms so that everyone knows what sustainable consumption means to him or her. Also, people need to understand that the environmental cost of a product is still external to the product's price on the market. This all requires a common language – but who will provide it? Canadian culture poses another communications challenge– telling people what to do doesn't work as well as having people come to it on their own. Eco-labeling and Canada's Environmental Choice program in particular are also critical tools with which more needs to be done. Finally, the role of legislation needs to be determined (voluntary, negotiated and mandatory approaches, prescriptive vs. performance-based regulations, etc.).
- **Resources and partners needed:** We have limited resources for education about environmental impacts. There is a need to integrate sustainable consumption into existing programs such as pollution prevention, energy efficiency and climate change. Several programs that received federal or provincial funds were successful, but these areas were cut first in the budget crunch due to short-term economic vision. We need to work from the top down and the bottom up, and effective leadership will be key.
- **Focus areas for collaboration:** We need to focus on educating schoolchildren (start with the kids). Another potential area for collaboration: Canada could reach out to help other countries as a leader, a source of technical expertise, and a funder.

UNITED STATES

- **Vision:** Our society will see sustainability as a physical necessity, not a political ideology. People will be more aware of sustainability and supportive of sustainable options. There will be systemic mechanisms in place to hold manufacturers accountable for their products and to change the signals sent by tax policies (particularly subsidies). At the same time, sustainable options will be the default and sustainable products will be more affordable. This will “idiot – proof” the decisionmaking process and give people the “ability to be lazy and do the right thing.” Communities will be the basis for moving towards sustainability, and people will value relationships and time over products.
- **Successes to date:** Efforts to raise awareness have mostly resulted in behavioral changes by environmentally active and/or wealthy consumers. Consumption of organic food products has increased each year, but it is a small fraction of overall agricultural production, and it is still too expensive for many consumers. In terms of more systemic changes, successes include: battery take-back programs, public sector green purchasing initiatives, faith-based initiatives, and community-based climate action groups. Qualified successes include: solid waste recycling (widespread recycling efforts have increased the volume of recycled waste significantly but generation of municipal solid waste by households has also gone up sharply), increases in energy efficiency of appliances (these were driven by cost

savings and federal minimum efficiency standards, not behavioral changes), and purchasing of recycled content products.

- **Tools and mechanisms for achieving vision:** Better communication through media, including more information on purchasing and production; politically active citizens and empowered communities; peer pressure; capital commitments for changes in infrastructure; research and development funding for sustainable alternatives; better tax systems and regulations; shift to a four-day work week.
- **Resources and partners needed:** Money, time, political capital; initiators and visionaries, government (all levels), international agencies, neighborhoods, industries, the financial community, universities, Hollywood (Environmental Media Association and celebrities), the media, our own organizations.
- **Focus areas for collaboration:** Our organizations will benefit from additional opportunities to learn about what each other is doing. We can also work together to map out a political schematic of opportunities and responsibilities for going forward. Together, we should identify players, targets, strategies, areas of influence, and weak areas that aren't being addressed. There will be opportunities to coordinate activities, but we need to be honest about the fact that we may at times have competing or conflicting interests.

MEXICO

- **Vision:** All sectors will share responsibility for promoting sustainable systems. We will be able to generate, access, and distribute relevant information easily, and we will have mechanisms to certify the degree of sustainability of a product/process.
- **Successes to date:** We are in the initial stage of dialog and instrumentation and are focusing on the integration of individual initiatives.
- **Tools and mechanisms for achieving vision:** A primary mechanism is the network of consultative councils established in our country. In Mexico, policies tend to come from the top down, and historically there have not been many opportunities to offer input. We need a peaceful way to influence change; we will be marginalized if we are seen as militant. Tools include funds, collaborative research, and human capital (exchanging people between countries to increase knowledge). **It would also be useful for us if the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation were to integrate sustainable production and consumption into the factors that it uses to evaluate the impact of NAFTA on the environment.
- **Resources and partners needed:** Government agencies, private sector entities, educational institutions, social organizations, and international agencies.
- **Focus areas for collaboration:** We have good individual initiatives, but they are not coordinated. We need a network in place to begin the process of integration. In addition, we are being inundated with new products displacing items already in the market, but we are not getting more sustainable options (example of tomatoes

being shipped to the United States – and then coming back across the border to Mexican markets!).

V. Overview of Organizations' Activities

After the small group report-outs, each participant spoke for several minutes about the sustainable consumption activities of his or her organization. Appendix C provides a written description of each organization's activities. Many participants noted that the presentations and handouts about the various organizations provided them with useful information about sustainable consumption initiatives that they were hearing about for the first time.

VI. Identification of Common Themes

Participants engaged in a brainstorming exercise where they identified themes common to one or more of the national sustainable consumption visions articulated in the earlier small group discussions. These themes included: moving from awareness to action; support and incentives for behavior changes; education; access to information (especially about products); government policy changes; changing the economic system (long-term view); coordination of different sectors of society; corporate responsibility; accountability; leadership and citizenship; funding; drivers for change; alternatives; addressing and overcoming obstacles; and community-level change.

It was originally envisioned that the meeting participants would subsequently break out into small groups, each of which would discuss opportunities for collaboration around one of the common themes identified above. Participants opted instead to launch directly into a large-group discussion of why and how their organizations might want to collaborate.

VII. Rationale and Strategy for Future Collaboration

Participants found it useful to articulate their reasons for attending the planning meeting in order to get a sense of everyone's expectations of future collaboration. Several participants chose to attend the meeting in order to "get out of the office to be with other people dealing with same issues," to find more cost-effective ways to conduct outreach, to help build the case for sustainable consumption within their own organization, or to make new contacts. Others indicated that they hoped the meeting would help produce strategies for getting the issue of sustainable consumption on the public and political agenda, increasing the issue's political legitimacy and influence, and challenging governments to "step up to the plate." All participants noted that they came to the meeting to talk about concrete deliverables and effecting change through action.

It was determined that a future collaborative effort would have the potential to add value in several ways. First, it could provide a mechanism for organizations to learn who is working on sustainable consumption issues and exactly what they are doing (information). Second, it could serve as a forum for organizations to exchange ideas and viewpoints (dialogue). Third, it could facilitate the development of a common and coordinated strategy

around sustainable consumption, including communication and outreach. Fourth, it could serve as a source of language and information to help shape policymaking (advocacy).

Participants discussed ways to raise awareness in the short term and effect broad-based change in the long term. A four-part strategy was suggested as a preliminary approach. Level One would consist of information exchange and *ad hoc* collaboration on specific projects. Level Two would consist of policy alignment where appropriate, as many trade associations do. Level Three would consist of actual projects (focus on individual actions we can take; we don't need to come up with a single definition first). Level Four would consist of the establishment of a common policy framework and adoption of shared language to address sustainable consumption issues. Participants agreed to explore this potential strategy further.

VIII. Structure of the Alliance: Initial Recommendations

Participants addressed the issue of the structure and format of future collaborative efforts. They discussed several potential models for collaboration, including a professional society or roundtable (similar to the U.S. National Pollution Prevention Roundtable), an advocacy group, a congress that sets a multi-year agenda (e.g., Consumers International), and a loose network. Participants decided to pursue the development of a strategic partnership that has characteristics of each of the models mentioned above, and they voted to refer to it as an "Alliance." Participants decided to postpone to a subsequent meeting a more detailed discussion of what the Alliance would look like and how it would work.

Varying opinions were expressed regarding eligibility to join in the Alliance. Some participants felt that businesses should be invited because they represent a sector of society that is key to the achievement of sustainable consumption goals. Others expressed a preference for limiting eligibility to government agencies and NGO's. Everyone agreed to defer the resolution of this issue to a future meeting.

It was noted that although the Alliance will constitute a new entity, it should take care to avoid duplicating projects or services that already exist. Rather, future collaborative efforts should use structures in place (e.g., ICSPAC, NACEC) where available and appropriate.

IX. Objectives of the Alliance: Preliminary Recommendations

Participants brainstormed nineteen possible Alliance objectives and then grouped them under four general themes, as follows:

- POLICY
 - (1) - define and promote national frameworks for sustainable production and consumption that are tied in with Agenda 21 commitments and Consumer Protection Guidelines

(2) - achieve efficiencies and synergies by building upon existing programs / issues / campaigns (e.g., pollution prevention, public health)

(3) - integrate sustainable consumption considerations into foreign policy

(4) - integrate sustainable consumption considerations into trade policy

(5) - make North America a model for the world

- **PUBLIC AWARENESS**

(6) - identify and obtain key data and information to make a compelling case for specific initiatives

(7) - institutionalize a grassroots effort to make people more aware as consumers

(8) - quantifiably increase media coverage of the issue

(9) - increase access to all materials regardless of language

- **MARKET / ECONOMIC STRATEGIES**

(10) - achieve measurable improvements in environmental purchasing by all levels of government in all 3 countries, by a specific date

(11) - same, for institutions and businesses

(12) - same, for individual consumers

(13) - support development of new products

(14) - overcome barriers to market acceptance (manufacturers, distributors, retailers, consumers)

(15) - support dematerialization

- **GROUP LOGISTICS**

(16) - identify funding sources and other organizations to help overcome resource challenges

(17) - develop appropriate language and framework to discuss sustainable consumption, including equity and poverty eradication issues

(18) - engage other key stakeholders

(19) - provide Internet structure to democratize and expand discussion about sustainable consumption

There was insufficient time to attempt to prioritize the suggested objectives. Participants agreed to vote by email for their top choices (see Action Items below). The objectives above have been numbered to facilitate the voting process.

Lowell Center staff agreed to draft a Mission Statement for the Alliance based on the discussion of objectives. The following draft was offered for comment and feedback:

“The North American Sustainable Consumption Alliance is a strategic partnership of people and organizations who are working to promote more sustainable patterns of consumption in Mexico, Canada, and the United States. They share the common goal of encouraging individuals, businesses, institutions, and governments to reduce their impact on the environment by changing how they consume materials and resources. The role of the Alliance is to facilitate information exchange, communication and outreach, and collaborative action around sustainable consumption. The Alliance also strives to place the issue of sustainable consumption at the forefront of the public and political agenda in all three countries.”

Based on feedback from various meeting participants, further group discussion is needed to finalize the language on the following parts of the draft Mission Statement:

- Composition of the Alliance. *Proposal*: delete “people” from “a strategic partnership of people and organizations.”
- Goal of the Alliance. *Proposal*: add “services” to “materials and resources.”
- Role of the Alliance. *Proposal #1*: change last phrase to “...and collaborative action around sustainable consumption initiatives and approaches.” *Alternate proposal*: change last phrase to “...and to take appropriate collaborative action to promote sustainable consumption.” *Proposal #2*: add “research” to “facilitate information exchange...”
- Scope. *Proposal*: delete “political” from “public and political agenda.”

Note that the draft language deliberately avoids the use of the term “member” because the issue of how to characterize participation in the Alliance is unresolved. For similar reasons, the draft mission statement does not identify specific activities of the Alliance (e.g., conferences) or types of organizations eligible to participate. Future revisions to the Mission Statement may address these issues more explicitly.

X. Moving Forward: Next Steps

Participants identified several steps that they could take in the short term to further the development of the Alliance. These include:

- Identifying and Contacting Other Stakeholders. In order to be a truly strategic partnership, the Alliance must include a broader range of individuals and organizations working to promote sustainable consumption. Participants drew up a preliminary (but by no means final) list of additional stakeholders to contact, including: the Mexican Consumers Association, the Ibero-American University,

the Mexico Youth Institute (Environmental Department), the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, Coop America, Consumers Choice Council, Terra Choice, IISD, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the Canadian Consumers Association, the Canadian Institute for Law and Policy, and Pollution Probe. In addition, they recommended that the Alliance reach out to private philanthropic foundations.

- Meeting Again. Participants recognized the need to meet for 2-3 days in the near future to further discuss the development of the Alliance. The meeting will focus on 2-3 key themes/issues to be selected (see Action Items below) and will provide an opportunity for in-depth exploration as well as strategy development. It was recommended that subsequent meetings take place in Canada and Mexico and that the Alliance seek funding to cover attendees' travel expenses.
- Keeping the Process Open and Participatory. Participants emphasized the importance of inviting additional stakeholders to subsequent meetings. They expressed particular interest in recruiting those organizations that were unable to attend this meeting (i.e., the United Nations Environment Programme, Los Alamos National Laboratory, the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, the Centre for Sustainability Studies, the Toronto Environmental Alliance, and the Washington Toxics Coalition). Participants also emphasized the need for the Alliance to be under "common ownership" rather than the proprietary project of any one entity.
- Sharing Information. Participants expressed interest in gaining access to an electronic list serve for future discussions. The sustainable consumption and production list serve hosted by Integrative Strategies Forum might be available for this purpose. Participants also wanted to continue mapping out each organization's sustainable consumption initiatives to keep one another updated and to make it easier to determine the extent to which specific activities are complementary or competing.
- Linking With Other Efforts. Participants noted that conferences and workshops provide opportunities to promote sustainable consumption and recruit partners for the Alliance. Upcoming events include: a Preparatory Meeting in New York City in January 2002, to provide input into the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio+10); the Center for a New American Dream's conference in Philadelphia on April 23-24, 2002, to cultivate green markets; and the Canadian Centre for Pollution Prevention's Roundtable on April 25-26, 2002, in Quebec City. Participants expressed interest in broadcasting these types of events via the list serve to make it easier for the Alliance to be represented at as many gatherings as possible.

Participants also identified additional steps for the Alliance to take once it is more fully developed. These include:

- working toward a common North American vision from the three country visions;

- defining a policy framework for sustainable consumption and standardizing sustainable consumption language;
- participating in the RIO+10 consultation process by issuing a white paper on the North America’s progress in the area of sustainable consumption;
- organizing or sponsoring conferences and workshops (e.g., co-sponsoring a sustainable consumption issues forum with SPAC);
- examining the links between NAFTA and sustainable consumption and engaging the CEC in discussion around this issue;
- developing and disseminating sustainable consumption case studies;
- conducting or sponsoring comparative research on sustainable consumption obstacles and successes in all three countries; and
- involving youth, media, and celebrities in sustainable consumption initiatives.

XI. Action Items

Lowell Center staff agreed to write up and distribute the proceedings of the meeting as part of their responsibilities as meeting hosts. They also agreed to serve as a temporary, *ad hoc* “communications clearinghouse” for the Alliance in the short term (i.e., until the next meeting) in order to facilitate further discussion while the Alliance is being developed.

All participants committed to undertaking the following action items after the meeting (please send information to Anne Berlin Blackman at blackman@turi.org by December 14):

- Vote on Themes. For each of the four categories listed in Section IX above, please choose your top two objectives and email your selections to Anne Berlin Blackman. The selection criteria that were chosen include: overall importance, significance of impact in furthering our mission, and relevance to Alliance members.
- Provide Comments on Mission Statement. Please send Anne your comments on the draft Mission Statement in Section IX above.
- Identify Additional Stakeholders. Please send Anne the names of additional individuals and organizations that should be involved in the Alliance. Indicate which individuals and organizations you would be willing to contact on behalf of the Alliance.

Individual participants also volunteered for the following tasks:

- Jeffrey Barber: Look into the possibility of offering access to ISF list serv.
- Scot Case, Jeffrey Barber, Chris Wolnik: Send out information on your respective conferences/ meetings.
- Mauro Barba, Duncan Bury: Explore the possibility of hosting or cosponsoring the next two meetings.

- Mauro Barba, Duncan Bury, Angie Leith: Explore options for obtaining funding for NGO's to attend next two meetings.
- Anne Berlin Blackman and Jack Luskin: Finalize the Mission Statement and tally votes on themes for next meeting.
- Riaz Escobedo: Translate final proceedings of October 11-12 meeting into Spanish.