

EDITORIAL

Jyoti Singh considers the costs of ever-increasing industrialisation and consumption.

In 1972, the Club of Rome, a group of thirty scientists, economists, educators and industrialists from ten different countries, shocked the world with their report on "The Limits to Growth" which investigated "five major trends of global concern – accelerating industrialization, rapid population growth, widespread malnutrition, depletion of nonrenewable resources and a deteriorating environment." More recently, three of these eminent environmental scientists have published "The Limits to Growth: the Thirty Year Update" (Meadows, Randers and Meadows). In 1972, although the book sold hugely throughout the globe, many scientists and economists scorned the ideas, predictions and recommendations put forth by the authors. It is therefore all the more worrying that the update shows clearly, unemotionally and quite objectively, that the original report was remarkably accurate.

Sometimes, particularly for the ordinary man, it is hard to understand how much industrial growth has accelerated. In western nations, there are now strict controls over all aspects of an industry with a view to ensuring the health and safety of workers, of the neighbouring population and of the environment at large. On the whole, these regulations are quite rigidly enforced. Thus the average westerner feels that his country is doing all it can to minimize the negative effects of industrialization.

In the third world, however, the picture is very different. A country like China, that has achieved extraordinary success in industrialization in this century alone, is still decades behind in its approach to the evils that come with it. Hardly a day goes by when there is not a report of a fireworks factory blowing up and killing its workers or a mine collapsing and burying scores of miners. Given the lack of health and safety regulations for its workforce, it is extremely unlikely that any environmental controls are in place.

The picture is no better in India where industrialization is spreading like wildfire with profit the sole aim and a blatant disregard for the environment. In a city like Kanpur, the most industrialized town in U.P., the pollution is all too obvious. But even out in the countryside, among villages that were once totally agricultural, cheap land has attracted rich industrialists and what was

once a quiet, beautiful area of villages and fertile fields now has to endure ugly noise pollution day and night, the disappearance of natural ponds, a fall in the water table of over 70 feet in thirty years, ash waste lining the roads and often hiding live coals, a river now stinking and black with effluents and acres of farmland destroyed by the ever-increasing flow of chemical waste. Shakumbri Straw Products Ltd in Bania Khera block, Moradabad district of U.P., has done all this and despite frequent complaints, petitions and requests for compensation for the poor farmers who have seen their livelihoods brutally diminished, the company has done nothing. Not a penny has been paid out and they continue to flout all regulations and controls with complete impunity.

This is only one example; in developing countries there are hundreds of thousands like this, many even worse. Similarly, if one looks at population growth, in the west contraception and family planning are the norm now but although China has long recognized the problem and has fiercely implemented its one-child programme, most third world countries have had very limited success in this area and one of the largest religions in the world today still does not allow its followers to practise any form of family planning. Among the very poor, a large family is often seen as their only asset.

In the west, the most pressing nutritional problem is over-nutrition and the medical profession is now genuinely concerned at the fast increasing tendency toward obesity. Ironically, one of the major causes of obesity is not just eating too much but eating the wrong foods, foods that are actually poor in nutritional value though high in speedy gratification. For the developing world, there seems to be a great deal of effort expended on programmes and slogans like the Millennium Goals, Make Poverty History and so on. Unfortunately, the figures suggest that the difference they make is minimal. Often the policies and practices that are followed with a view to reducing malnutrition and ending poverty are the work of middle-class, comfortably-off academics who have lived and worked in towns and cities all their lives and have no grass-roots knowledge or understanding of the needs of the poor and especially the rural poor.

Now we come to the question whether or not the world has sufficient resources to sustain the present economic development of the current world population of 7 billion people and give them all a

reasonable standard of living. The answer is conditional. It all depends on the major decisions made by those societies that consume the most resources. There are several possibilities: they may continue to consume resources at the same level as they are doing at present; they may take on recycling in a big way; they may develop ways to improve the durability of those products that are made from scarce resources; they may actively work towards a social and economic change based on satisfying a person's needs but keeping the number of things he uses that derive from nonrenewable sources to a minimum.

Most vital of all, though, is whether or not we can, some time this century, achieve an equitable distribution of wealth and reduce the huge gaps between rich and poor countries and rich and poor classes within those countries.

The signs aren't good. For those of us fortunate enough to travel regularly between north and south countries, the enormous difference in consumption levels is very striking. Let's take the U.K. as a fairly average western nation and go shopping for food. We'll go to a supermarket for that's where the majority of people buy their essential foodstuffs.

These shops are huge; the range of goods they sell seems to increase almost daily. Not so long ago, with an item like fruit, you could only get what was in season and grown locally. Now season has very little meaning and the amount and variety of imported fruit is frankly astonishing – everything from Indian and Pakistani mangoes, Kenyan guavas, Brazilian papayas, Caribbean bananas, New Zealand kiwis, Australian apples and South African pears to nectarines, peaches, melons, grapes, pomegranates and persimmon from the Mediterranean and Israel.

That in itself isn't bad, of course, since presumably it is generating a healthy growth of local produce in the country of origin. What is most worrying, as you wander up and down the long aisles in these vast food centers, is the enormous and totally unnecessary choice that is available – toilet paper of ten different kinds, embossed, soft, extra soft, recycled, etc etc; half a dozen brands of baked beans; cotton buds, cotton pads, cotton balls; shampoos, soaps, deodorants, toiletries for every likely and unlikely need a body could have, fifty kinds of juice, salted crisps, low fat crisps, crisps in twenty different flavours and a dozen different shapes, forty kinds of soup in cans, packets, cartons and bottles, six huge freezers crammed with

frozen meat, fish, fruit and vegetables of every sort, twenty-five different kinds of loaves, eight sorts of bread rolls, four kinds of pitta, wraps, baguettes and naan, thirty kinds of salted biscuits, sixty types of sweet ones, forty different cereals, twenty kinds of jam, ten varieties of rice, fifteen kinds of pasta – the list is endless.

And that's just food. There's also cars, tvs, dvd players, ipods, microwaves, washing-machines, dishwashers, the latest fashion in clothes – all the things that it seems are essential to life in the west.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science, in its Atlas of Population and Environment, points out that for many resources, "the United States of America is the world's largest consumer in absolute terms. For a list of 20 major traded commodities, it takes the greatest share of 11 of them: corn, coffee, copper, lead, zinc, tin, aluminum, rubber, oil seeds, oil and natural gas. For many more it is the largest per-capita consumer.

A typical example is meat. China, with the world's largest population, is the highest overall producer and consumer of meat, but the highest per-capita consumption in the world is that of the United States. The average United States citizen consumes more than three times the global average of 37 kilos per person per year. Africans consume less than half the global average, and South Asians consume the least," at less than 6 kilos per person per year.

We can't put all the blame on the west. Consumption rates vary greatly and frequently depend on the commodity. "Water use is often as high or higher in poor, arid countries as in rich nations. When precipitation is lowest, demand for crop irrigation is typically highest, and where water-hungry cash crops are grown as well as food, the demands are higher still. When the country is in a poor state of development, with dilapidated infrastructure, then water use can be immensely inefficient, producing the highest water use of all, as illustrated by the rates in the arid, cotton-growing central Asian states of the former Soviet Union. During the 1990s Turkmenistan withdrew more than 5,000 cubic meters per person per year, with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan all withdrawing 2,000 cubic meters or more per person per year. By comparison, per-capita withdrawals in the United States were around 1,800 cubic meters, in France 650 and in the United Kingdom 200" (AAAS Atlas of Population and Environment")

One recent trend in the west is to continue consuming at current rates but be really conscientious about recycling. While recycling goods wherever possible is obviously not a bad thing, the fact remains that we simply cannot continue to consume the world's resources at the present rate.

On 24th October, 2006 WWF presented its 2006 Living Planet Report in Beijing and shocked its audience by the revelation that "Humans are stripping nature at an unprecedented rate and will need two planets' worth of natural resources every year by 2050 on current trends." Their Director-General, James Leape, had even more disturbing news. "If everyone around the world lived as those in America, we would need five planets to support us."

He also pointed to those specific countries that are living well beyond the planet's means. Top of the list was the U.A.E., followed closely by the U.S.A., Finland, Canada and Australia. Between 1961 and 2003, the population of the world more than tripled but consumption has outpaced even that tremendous surge.

It isn't just the question of resources or how long this kind of consumption can possibly be sustained and at what expense to the rest of the world. It's what it suggests about life in the west. Is this all it's about? Is this what gives us quality of life? Is this what makes life worth living?

And while life in the west continues in this vein, with many Americans listing shopping as their favourite leisure activity, in the third world you have a picture that is even more dispiriting. The burgeoning middle-classes have started to climb the conspicuous consumption bandwagon. Their children scorn the traditional dress and wear jeans and t-shirts; they prefer pizzas and noodles to local dishes; they listen to disco music and watch films that are flagrant copies of Hollywood movies.

Putting aside the question whether or not it is a good thing to aspire to the passion for consumption that has become a way of life in the west, a more urgent question is whether or not it would be possible for all nations to support the same levels of consumption as currently operate in the U.S.A. or Britain. If it were, what would the effect be on resources of water, electricity, gas, land and crops? What kind of pollution would production on the scale necessary to support this level of consumption generate?

Or is it more likely that in order to sustain high levels of consumption in the west, the gap between rich and poor countries will simply widen even further?