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6 Feb. 2011

## **MCG as Consumption Choices**

Dear Prof. Munasinghe,

It is truly an honor for you to ask my opinions on your [MCG proposal](#). I would be happy to help you champion these ideas any way I can. Consumption is the cause of our problems. People blame business for emissions, yet businesses only emit because the consumers demand their goods and energy. So I think you are on to something important. As I give you my thoughts just be aware that they are intended to help, and not to indicate that I think your ideas are not great.

The first thing that comes to my mind is that most everybody who attends these UN meetings are themselves in that top 20% of consumers if not up there near that percentage. Yet we are also the most aware of the issues compared to the rest of that 20%. The rest of that 20% are people we know. Large TVs are everything, nothing impresses guest more than to cook some steaks on the grill when they come to visit -- you know all of this. The point is that influencing consumption voluntarily is going to be a huge and difficult task. Not only that, but the growing ranks of wealthy from countries like China and India desire those same luxuries.

So we need to ask ourselves, to whom are these consumption goals aimed? Who will make use of them? Almost nobody has heard of Millennium Development Goals or the Cancun climate change conference. Therefore, MCG themselves won't likely influence behavior. Rather, we need to find messengers. Who is delivering the messages now? Its non-profit groups who are finding responsible leaders in business. Businesses need to influence consumers by not just making sustainable choices available, but by making sustainable choices the easier choice to make. Labeling of carbon life cycle footprints on goods is an easy tool. Who wouldn't purchase the product that used less energy to make, pack, and ship than an equivalent product that has a bigger footprint. The top 20% is more likely to pay slightly more for a sustainable product than are people who are not as wealthy. I think a great way to advance consumer awareness is to advertise how certain companies are meeting Global Reporting Initiative standards or similar standards and advertise that meeting these standards is a good thing. This is how Home Depot was pressured into not purchasing old growth tropical wood. It's what made McDonalds stop using Styrofoam packaging. Yes, these companies still feed our consumer appetites in unsustainable ways, but they did make changes that made a difference. Much more can be done.

I think Sustainability needs to be advertised from a global perspective. This is what my organization Trailhead Perspectives is about. The top 20% are immune to the biggest effects of unsustainable consumption in the near term. Most of the effects of our consumption are being felt beyond our wealthy communities. Therefore, I don't think the top 20% realizes there is a

problem. That is why the MCG is useful, because it is a way to demonstrate the disproportionate consumption in a simple measurable statement. We can then say that it is this precise measurement that is the single biggest cause for the global effects of unsustainable development. If we say that the problems will be mitigated if we meet a desired specified consumption measurement for the top 20%, we can see how this problem is of our personal making.

The natural response in America is: why should we cut our consumption in the U.S. if China's growth will make our reduction efforts meaningless. My thought on this is that people will need to see specific numbers about how many individual Americans are in the top 20% as compared to other countries. Give people an income level cutoff mark so people can say "that's me." We also need to see the cumulative consumption of Americans who are in the top 20% compared to the cumulative consumption of those in other specific countries who are also in the top 20%. Americans like to keep score between countries in a way that doesn't penalize us for having being first to develop or for not having as large a percentage of people in poverty. (China's poor population lowers their per capita consumption compared to that of Americans) If we are keeping score, we want to know how the data tables are tilted. This is why the rules of these measurements need to be easy to describe. We will need to address the masses here, not the "educated elite" who go to UN meetings. Consumers don't care what specific criteria are used, they just need to see the score so they can be motivated to make quick and easy consumer choices. MCGs need to fit into a 30 second TV advertisement.

So now I will talk about what is included in your goals. If American's even think that someone in the international community is trying to get us to eat healthier and be healthier, they will say it's just a socialist communist attempt to take away our rights. Even talking about limiting junk food will be a lightning rod that will forever make it impossible to get this done. If certain right wing media news pundits ever find out that issues like obesity and other "healthy lifestyle values" considerations were ever part of the early stages of this discussion, MCG will forever be labeled as an anti-American initiative, even if these issues never become part of the final MCGs. They will say that the past discussions of whether or not to include those healthy lifestyle issues are proof that there is an anti-American agenda and that, even if MCGs are good for us today, the real purpose is to slowly control every consumer choice in America. I know this sounds irrational, but that is the way half of Americans think. Michelle Obama got attacked for suggesting that kids should eat healthier. Politics right now in America is harsh. Therefore, I suggest MCGs should primarily address issues where consumers can simply choose between two similar consumption choices rather than being asked to give-up a lifestyle.

We can choose renewable energy over non-renewable energy.

We can choose more water efficient landscaping and still have landscaping

We can choose more energy efficient transportation as long as it is not too inefficient in our use of our time.

We can reduce waste as long as businesses provide us with the product options that require less waste.

However, consumers want the right to eat lots of calories and be fat if they feel like it, to have two cars, to not exercise, to work as much or as little as we like.

Therefore, rather than making these lifestyle items themselves be part of the criteria of sustainability, why not simply measure the resources needed to make the high calorie foods and to make and drive those cars. Let the American businesses and non-profit groups that Americans trust be the ones to break the news that that diet choices like eating meat and other health choices are relevant issues in terms of sustainable development. These culturally related consumer topics shouldn't be part of the "international" discussion because it looks too much like big brother telling us what to do. Here is how I see meat entering the discussion in a productive way: American's measure the sustainable impact of their consumption and . . . "what is this? Look at how much our meat choices are affecting our bottom line MCG score. I'm glad somebody I trust pointed that out to me. And I'm glad it's my choice to eat meat or not eat meat and nobody is telling me what choice I should make. Since I want to be a better global citizen, maybe I can cut back a little." This is different than somebody from the UN saying to Americans "You shouldn't eat so much meat."

The difference is that net end consumption level goals are set, but the people choose where they should cut back rather than labeling all unnecessary consumption as bad. I know this is a gross over generalization of what you are proposing. I know that you intend this to be voluntary. However, our words will be twisted and we have to be careful to avoid those potential traps. If we don't, and we fall prey to a smear campaign by those on the far right in America, it will be hard to get support by those that matter in America. We need to keep Sustainable Development as a neutral issue in American politics and not an issue demonized by the right or else we've lost a huge number of those 20%.

Finally, as to what percentage to use, 20%, 15%, 25%. I think this should be chosen based on where the economic and political power lies. Does raising it to 25% allow us to capture the middle class in more countries? On the other hand, if we lower it, are we then able to better demonstrate to the key people how privileged they really are. I don't think we want to lower it too low where we lose the general masses of America and Europe.

I hope this helps.

Warmest Regards,  
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