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### **Abstract**

Using economic principles to explain the nuances of consumer decisions with global implications does not adequately capture the reality of modern consumption. Embracing a global perspective would enable consumer studies professionals to compensate for this shortcoming since it consists "of the information, attitudes, awareness, and skills which taken together, can help individuals understand the world, how they affect others, and how others affect them" (p.19).<sup>1</sup> As this paper explains the essence of a global perspective, it reinterprets a collection of economic principles towards global sensitivity. Six ideas are suggested to facilitate a dialogue among consumer studies professionals about practising from a global perspective.

Consuming from a global perspective means people become concerned with the impact of consumption and production on the environment, other cultures and those not yet born. It means they gain an appreciation of the notions of voluntary simplicity and conservation, and a deeper respect for indigenous knowledge and how it is passed on to future generations (usually orally). People start to think about the consequences of their resource management decisions, appreciating that this involves developing a growing awareness of global dynamics, the state of the planet, and the existence and nuances of other cultures and the reciprocal interrelationships between these cultures. Living a sustainable life style is not possible without adopting a global perspective since it inherently assumes an appreciation for the impact of technology and development on the integrity of local indigenous communities, infrastructures and natural environments.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

Classical economic theory assumes that individuals seek to maximize satisfaction, are fully informed, rationale, and act in their own self-interest.<sup>4,5</sup> A global perspective would challenge these assumptions on several grounds. At whose or at what expense is a consumer's satisfaction attained: the environment, human rights, standards of living, human dignity, sustainable development? Market theory often claims to be value free.<sup>6</sup> Do rational consumers base their decisions on values as well as facts by engaging in value reasoning as well as rationale decision making? Does the extent of a fully informed consumer include an appreciation that their view of the world is not universally shared, an awareness of prevailing and emerging world conditions and developments, an appreciation that there are a diversity of ideas and practices found in human societies and communities, and a modest comprehension of key traits and mechanisms of the world system? Do consumers acting in their own interest balance this action against the interests of others, humanity, society and the environment? A global perspective mandates that consumers pose these questions and deal with the answers.

### **Globalizing Economic Principles**

The following section presents initial thinking about how to globalize some fundamental economic principles: the formal economy, consumer demand, producer supply, externalities, marginal utility, the substitution effect, opportunity costs, inflation, and present and future values.

#### **The Formal Economy**

A global perspective necessitates that people redefine their understanding of the economy, conventionally focused on the formal market sectors dealing with the relationships between the producer and the individual. This approach neglects the informal economy, taken to be the household and domestic production activity of women and children, non-profit co-operatives, collectives, and community enterprises.<sup>7</sup> Engberg<sup>7</sup> contributes the concept of the "whole economy" which places as much weight on the informal sector as it does on the formal. To make the informal sector even more visible brings the study of economics into the realm of global sensitivity. Citizens making consumption decisions partially based on the impact of their choice on the informal non-market household sector would now consider how they affect others and how others affect them, the touchstone of a global perspective.<sup>1</sup> What will be the impact of a decision to consume a particular good on the household subsistence, production or community activity of a third world family? How will it affect their potable water, arable land, food security, and freedom from war and poverty? From a global perspective, it will not be alien to consider these factors as inherent in a consumer decision.

#### **Consumer Demand**

Consumer demand conventionally refers to the amount of a product or service that a consumer is able and willing purchase at a given price.<sup>8</sup> If price is the only choice criteria that is important or valued by a consumer, this

demand rule will generally hold. Since consumers do not yet see themselves as part of a larger whole that is affected by a collectivity of individual consumption decisions, they continue to value money more than any other choice criteria.<sup>3</sup> But what happens to demand when other choice criteria become more paramount? Those consumers concerned with human dignity, standard of living and self-sustainable communities may not purchase more when prices fall because they are making consumption decisions based on a globally sensitive set of choice criteria. Stevens<sup>9</sup> challenges citizens to rethink individual rights and emphasize social or community responsibilities and to perceive themselves as "consumers as citizens". Gabriel and Lang<sup>10</sup> describe a "citizen" as a responsible, socially aware consumer willing to make reasoned judgements and sacrifices for the common good. This definition challenges the conventional economic approach that assumes that consumers have a vote in the maintenance of the market structure; each time they make a purchase, they cast their ballot.<sup>11</sup> The new demand principle could read: *consumption decreases or changes as relative global consciousness rises and consumption increases or changes as the relative global consciousness falls.*

### **Producer Supply**

The law of supply assumes that the producer stops increasing the manufacture of additional units when the higher price of production wipes out any extra profit.<sup>8</sup> Four global principles are inherent in this situation: (a) balanced development means demands should not strain local supply, (b) technology should be comparable with the local culture, (c) international reciprocity should lead to an appreciation that each culture has much to give and much to gain from cross cultural interactions and, (d) sustainable lifestyles should involve an intricate balance of all influences operating within a culture.<sup>2,3</sup> Familiar concepts that bring these principles to the forefront of the supply side are: corporate accountability, corporate ethics, and socially responsible corporate behaviour.<sup>12</sup> Lusby<sup>13</sup> strongly maintains that these variables should be part of consumer choice criteria and supply side decisions. A new supply principle could read: *the higher the cost to society, the less produced. The producer refrains from initiating, or stops increasing, the manufacture of additional units when the social, environmental, familial, community, economic and regulatory cost of production exceeds benefits; profits are important but secondary to human, societal, environmental and global well-being.*

### **Externalities (Social Costs) of Market Transactions**

Traditional economic theory concerns itself with the costs someone has to absorb, or benefits they enjoy, when another person uses a product or service.<sup>8</sup> It does this under the rubric of externalities or social costs which include air pollution from industry, water pollution from dry cleaning, and second hand smoke. A global perspective necessitates that the principle of *social costs also incorporate the impact of transactions made in the Northern economy on citizens or environments of those living in Southern economies.* What of human rights, environmental integrity, societal well-being, cultural sustainability, political stability, familial well-being, quality of life and standards of living of those living in the Southern hemisphere? A global perspective would encourage exploration of these social cost issues during a consumer decision.

### **Marginal Utility**

Diminishing marginal utility means that consumers buy more units of a product or service when the relative price falls and less when the price rises because satisfaction decreases as the price goes up.<sup>8</sup> This axiom can be challenged simply by questioning what is being valued? Consider those consumers who purposely buy products produced in developing countries and distributed by alternative intermediaries, e.g., Bridgehead, Oxfam. They may pay more knowing that the producers (individuals and families) use the monies made from their cooperative and community workshop endeavours to help improve the living conditions in their communities. The logo on these products could say "made with dignity"<sup>14</sup> and the choice criteria of human dignity may be much more highly valued by globally conscientious consumers than price. In fact, *they may get more pleasure from consuming additional units of a product than for earlier units when the relative contribution to human dignity, standard of living and a self-sustainable community increases.*

### **Substitution Effect**

Economic theory posits that, when the relative price of a good rises, consumers buy less of that good and more of a close substitute.<sup>8</sup> From a global perspective, the assumption that consumers will continue to consume, just buy a different product, is a moral issue. People need to resist the inclination to assume that they need to spend money to satisfy needs and wants.<sup>13</sup> People also need to limit their perception of costs associated with switching to a substitute to those of time and money, resources commonly held as "the consumers two resources" (p.22).<sup>8</sup> A global perspective appreciates that consumers see values as a resource. If consumers value how they affect others and how others affect them, they may give serious consideration to substituting one product for another. They could question

the global integrity of purchasing the product and the substitute and, as Lusby<sup>13</sup> allows, decide not to purchase at all. The substitute effect principle could read, *when the relative price of a good or service rises, consumers will consider the global integrity of the close substitute; indeed, they could question the merits of continuing to consume the product or the substitute at all.*

### **Scarcity and Opportunity Costs**

Conventional economic theory assumes that consumer's wants and needs exceed their level of resources; hence, consumers have to make decisions about using limited resources in the best way to reach goals. These choices involve trade offs or, in economic jargon, opportunity costs.<sup>8</sup> This paper challenges the premise that the main resources are time and money and that the costs are often taken to be lost time or lost money. What of the human, social, or environmental costs and tradeoffs of ill conceived consumer decisions? Peterson<sup>15</sup> maintains that, from an ethical, moral perspective, consumers are not free to ignore the effects of their consumption choices on other's lives (those living elsewhere or not yet born). A global economic principle could contend that *opportunity costs recognize that when a consumer makes a trade off to attain a highly valued alternative, their analysis will incorporate moral, environmental, as well as economic, criteria and will accommodate current and personal, as well as third party, intergenerational needs and wants.*

### **Inflation**

Inflation refers to the rise in the average costs for goods and services leading to a decrease in the purchasing power of a dollar.<sup>8</sup> From a global perspective, one would consider the *rising costs of human rights* as well as rising prices. What of the standard of living and other innate rights of citizens living in developing countries where many Northern goods and services are being produced? From a global perspective, citizens need to recognize that sometimes human rights need to supersede consumer rights, or at the least become part of the consumer decision making equation, since all consumer rights assume the basic human rights.<sup>3</sup> Should money, price, control, competition and profit be placed before caring relationships, peace, justice, security, and freedom? From a global perspective, the answer would be no or let us talk about it.

### **Present and Future Value**

From the conventional economic perspective, how the consumer values the present compared to the future is called their rate of time preference. This position dictates their inclination to save now for the future or spend money now. Consumers who have high rates of time preference (strongly favour the present over the future) are less likely to save and invest and are more likely to borrow.<sup>8</sup> From a global perspective, consumers would appreciate that choices made and actions taken today have repercussions for the global present and future.<sup>1,16</sup> From a global perspective, the principle of future and present values would be completely reversed with the well-being of others and the world taking precedence over money. *Consumers who have high rates of time preference (who strongly favour the future over the present) are more likely to make consumption decisions that take into consideration the well-being of future generations, the environment and global well-being and vice versa.*

### **Facilitating a Global Dialogue Among Consumer Studies Professionals**

Several ideas are suggested to initiate a dialogue about the merits of shifting paradigms to a global perspective: (a) redefine resources, (b) perceive consumers as citizens, (c) increase the understanding of the link between consumer and human rights, (d) examine the relationship between gender and consumption, (e) appreciate the inherent link between international trade and the consumer interest, and (f) consider the consumer professional's role in civil society.

### **Redefine Resources**

The future of global consumption depends on questioning the economic, cultural, environmental and moral grounds of our *resource* management decisions.<sup>10</sup> From a global perspective, consumer studies professionals have to redefine resources since economic theory is basically about allocation of scarce resources. Engberg<sup>17</sup> suggests that resources can expand beyond time, money, energy, human built facilities, and goods and services to include: (a) indigenous knowledge (everyday local knowledge and technology and how that is taught and passed on, usually in the oral tradition rather than the written tradition); (b) raw material resources that are produced, transformed and processed into essentials for day-to-day survival and food security; (c) infrastructures supporting individuals and families including the social organizations of family and kinship, community groups, political representation, voluntary agencies, government extension services, credit and loans associations, and cooperatives; (d) means of access to money and financial assets including marriage, inheritances, labour, kin or group affiliation, gifts, income transfer, purchases with cash, leasing, rental, social relations, and in kind (social reciprocity); (e) the paid, unpaid and voluntary labour of men, women, children and relatives; (f) any contact with the outside world; and finally, (g)

local and outside political power.

### **Consumers as Citizens First**

One drawback of relying solely on the economic paradigm to prepare one to practice is the tendency to conceive people as consumers rather than as citizens. From this perspective, consumers do not learn to see themselves as part of a larger whole that is affected by a collectivity of individual consumption decisions.<sup>3</sup> So, until consumers begin to see themselves as global citizens first, they may continue to value money (ability to pay) more than any other choice criteria. People have no serious difficulty thinking of themselves as consumers but thinking of themselves as citizens is problematic<sup>10</sup> while perceiving themselves as "consumers as citizens" is even more of a challenge.<sup>9</sup> The idea of a citizen as an active member of a dynamic community implies mutuality and control as well as a balance of rights and duties. In as much as they make choices, citizens have a sense of responsibility necessitating that they confront the implications of their choices, their meanings and their moral value. Citizens have to argue their views and engage in the views of others. The citizen strives for self-discipline and control and a deeper sense of community and general welfare. Consumers, on the other hand, need not be members of a community nor do they have to act on behalf of the community at large. Consumers operate in an impersonal market economy where they make choices unburdened by guilt or social obligations; they just have to be able to pay.<sup>10</sup> Stevens<sup>9</sup> believes that consumer professionals should teach people about their role as citizens in addition to that of consumer.

### **Consumer and Human Rights**

In 1995, the UN celebrated the 10th anniversary of the 1985 establishment of its Consumer Protection Guidelines designed to provide direction for developing countries attempting to incorporate consumer rights into their consumer protection frameworks. These guidelines have become the cornerstone of Consumers International's (CI), formerly the International Organization of Consumer Unions (IOCU), initiatives, especially in Less Developed Countries (LDCs)<sup>18</sup> (see Table 1). The UN's Consumer Protection Guidelines are now under review. Asher clarifies that, in 1995, the UN Commission on Sustainable Development took over the administration of the UN Consumer Protection Guidelines. This means that consumer protection will inherently include global implications of resource management decisions since the Commission recommended that "the Guidelines be expanded to include Guidelines for sustainable *consumption* patterns [italics added]" (p.9).<sup>18</sup> It urged international bodies (including educators) to undertake work to change production and consumption patterns and facilitated this process by suggesting twenty new criteria for consumer protection (see Table 2).

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

CI implemented its priority to place greater emphasis on the Third World consumer in LDCs by forming a group of regional offices for Southern developing economies in Asia and the Pacific (ROAP), Latin America and the Caribbean (ROLAC), and Africa (ROAF). In 1948, the UN declared 30 articles in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>19</sup> Table 1 compares the UN human rights with the UN consumer rights on the assumption that consumer rights assume the basic human rights.<sup>3</sup> A global perspective of the marketplace involves an examination of all factors contributing to human rights and consumer rights including social structures, living and work conditions, health policies, profit sharing and fair business practices, justice, and education in both Northern and Southern economies.<sup>20</sup> Consumer studies professionals are urged to use the information in Tables 1 and 2 to facilitate dialogue and reflection on the link between consumer rights, human rights and sustainable consumption, central concepts of a global perspective.

### **Gender and Consumption in LDCs**

Consumer studies professionals need to expand their understanding of the link between gender and consumption. Women often represent the livelihood of children, elders, relatives or members of their extended family, as well as themselves, when they makes decisions in the marketplace. Lessons from Africa provide justification for considering gender with consumption. The continent of Africa was arbitrarily divided into 50 countries by Western and European colonizers. Historically, African women made many of the production decisions. When the colonizers refused to deal with women, *assuming* that men would be the appropriate gender for production related discussions, centuries old traditions were forced to try to adapt to the dominant influences of the colonizers. The result has been a detrimental blending of the terms *sex* (biological term) and *gender* (role term) such that women are expected to be active in the home in unpaid labour while men are now seen as major players in the public sphere (market, paid labour and government). Yet, in reality, women in LDCs generate from 50-80% of sustenance production (day-to-day production and gathering of food to eat for food security) and get little to no government support in this fundamental role.<sup>21,22,23</sup>

It is important that consumer studies professionals begin to embrace the meanings of gender in the role of

consumption since "our actions and experiences as [Northern] consumers cannot be detached from our actions and experiences as social, [economic], political and moral agents" (p.4).<sup>10</sup> Consumer studies professionals are challenged to appreciate the merit of "correlating [Northern] technological developments with the triumph of materialism over spiritualism, the separation of production over consumption and the privileging of the former over the latter, the organization of the [resultant] social structure into family life and work life, and finally the organization of consumption and production as gendered categories" (p.246).<sup>21</sup>

### **Consumer Interest and International Trade**

Trade issues should be a central focus of consumer studies from a global perspective. However, the powerful link that exists between international global trade and the consumer interest is almost invisible.<sup>24</sup> Consumer studies professionals must acquire a modest comprehension of key traits and mechanisms of the world system, especially the trade system.<sup>3</sup>

because the purchasing power of Southern consumers is being eroded by trade practices between countries. Their living standards have declined, they have been forced to change their patterns of consumption and production to satisfy wants of industrialized powers and, ironically, international trade actually prevents LDCs from developing and industrializing. Those LDCs that have advanced are thwarted by the Northern trade practice of preventing imports from LDCs into Northern economies so as to protect home industries and technological advances.<sup>25</sup>

Allain<sup>25</sup> argues that this problem is caused by the distortion of the entire world production pattern due to the continued domination of Northern economies in the world power structure: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO) and the UN. Consumer studies professionals need to appreciate that many policies made by these organizations impact on the quality of life of those living in Southern countries: economic, foreign affairs, fiscal (public deficit and debt), monetary (exchange and interest rates), free trade, foreign aid, and agriculture policies. Practising from a global perspective means being aware of problems related to choices people and nations face and how these choices change as people gain a consciousness of global systems.<sup>2</sup>

### **Consumer Studies Professionals in Civil Society**

The theme of the 1997 CI Congress in Chili was consumers as citizens in the civil society. The civil society is made up of non-commercial, non-governmental, and public interest organizations (including professions) all focused on altering the current social structure to compensate for the centralization of power and to mitigate the shortcomings of markets and the political process on behalf of citizens at large.<sup>26</sup> "The civil society is the social space between families and the private sector and the state where entities address the power relations within the society and work with marginalized citizens to empower them... and help them gain access to material, political, social and cultural resources" (pp.11,12).<sup>27</sup> Those working in the civil society are supposed to act as a counterweight to state power, open up channels of communication and participation for marginalized groups, provide training grounds for activists and promote pluralism.<sup>28</sup> They provide a collective voice for those who individually have little access to power with policy makers and thereby bring to policy makers the insight and experience of those working with and on behalf of marginalized citizens.<sup>27</sup>

The players in the civil society share the policy arena with the state and market players. But, "only a well-balanced civil society can promote a healthy vision of a moral universe" (p.32),<sup>29</sup> which is the underpinning of the global perspective. Consumer studies professionals are key players in the civil society and they need to begin to see themselves in the role of creating balance in civil society as well as balance in the marketplace. The satisfaction of basic needs to sustain human society is fundamental to any economic system<sup>30</sup> leading to an increase in human and social capital. Human capital is the abilities, knowledge and skills each person acquires and develops throughout their lifetime. Social capital refers to the features of communities which make them more productive: trust, communication, teamwork and reciprocity.<sup>31,32</sup>

### **Summary and Conclusions**

This paper argues that conventional economic theory alone cannot adequately explain consumer decisions made from a global perspective. Continuing to rely on the prevailing micro-economic paradigm in a global economic system is irresponsible. To make this point, nine economic principles were reinterpreted from a global perspective (in italics): the formal economy, consumer demand, producer supply, externalities, marginal utility, the substitution effect, opportunity costs, inflation and present and future values. A collection of compelling ideas dealing with the consumer interest in relation to resources, citizens in civil society, human rights, sustainable consumption, gender, and international trade was introduced to facilitate a dialogue on the merits of adopting a global perspective in the field of consumer studies.

Consumer studies professionals have to individually and collectively reconsider their approach to marketplace decisions. We are challenged to examine, from a global perspective, our own ideology, assumptions, principles and values, our current knowledge base, curricula, text books, and lectures, their policy recommendations, media comments, research programs and community networks, even daily practice with individuals and families. Are we comfortable teaching people to be "good consumers" from a market theory perspective rather than "good citizens" from a global perspective? If not, we can begin to appreciate that global principles need to be considered in concert with economic principles as people make consumption decisions.<sup>35</sup> A global perspective is a powerful lens from which to practice as a consumer studies professional in civil society. Embracing a global perspective to understand the global marketplace could lead to an increase in human and social capital to counter the mounting inventory of market capital, often amassed at the expense of people and communities across cultures and societies.

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**Table 1**  
**Comparison of Consumer and Human Rights<sup>18,19</sup>**

***Basic Human Rights United Nations 1948***

- . Free and equal
- . Entitled to all rights and freedoms in the declaration
- . Security of person
- . No slavery
- . No torture
- . Are a person before the law
- . Right to protection of the law against discrimination
- . Right to effective remedy
- . Need a reason for being arrested
- . Trial by peers
- . Presumed innocent
- . Freedom from interference of privacy (family, home or correspondence)
- . Free to move within the country
- . Can leave and return to country
- . Can seek asylum
- . Can choose a nation(ality)
- . Can marry of own free will and have a family
- . Family is fundamental unit of society
- . Can own property
- . Can have free thought, conscience and religion
- . Can express opinions
- . Can gather in public
- . Can have a vote
- . Right to access to public service
- . Right to dignity and personality via social services
- . Work
- . Equal pay
- . Pay equal to assurance of human dignity
- . Can form and join a union
- . Standard of living adequate for health and well-being with special status for women and children
- . Education
- . Can share and participate in community and culture
- . Copyright and intellectual property
- . Peace
- . Responsible to community and democratic society

***Basic Consumer Rights United Nations 1985***

- . Protection from hazards to health and physical safety
- . Promotion and protection of economic interests
- . Access to information to make informed choices
- . Standards and testing for safety and quality of goods and services
- . Distribution facilities for goods and services (storage and retail in rural centres)
- . Encourage establishment of cooperatives and other trading alternatives
- . Consumer education as integral part of curricula in educational system
- . Effective redress, especially for low income
- . Freedom to form consumer and other relevant groups and organizations
- . Freedom to present their views in decision making process (voice in policy in government and business)
- . Provide and maintain adequate infrastructure to develop, implement and monitor consumer protection policies, especially in rural areas; strive for international cooperation and coordination
- . Business must obey laws and regulations
- . Include universities, private and public enterprises in consumer related research
- . Special concern for food, water, drugs, pesticides and chemicals

**Table 2**

**Proposed 1997 Expansion of the 1985 United Nations Consumer Protection Guidelines (Extrapolated from Asher, 1997)<sup>18</sup>**

- . set up an international professional association to encourage strong networking and a cooperative approach (independent of government)
- . make sure consumer voice is heard at global rule making bodies

- . focus on basic needs
- . include privatization of utilities as consumer issue
- . extend existing competition measures to promote competition and consumer welfare
- . harmonize rules on safe goods so the rules do not become trade barriers
- . include liability laws
- . pay attention to government as service provider
- . focus on access to justice
- . get UN and OECD to develop basic model of consumer protection laws with strong infringement enforcement and victim compensation regardless of jurisdiction in global marketplace
- . develop guidelines for effective corporate 'in house' compliance (versus 'in market' compliance)
- . ensure 14 credibility criteria for voluntary codes of conduct
- . develop 12 elements of effective consumer complaint handling system
- . utilize seven elements of effective consumer charters in monopolies
- . push for industry level consumer issues committees and corporate specific consumer affairs departments
- . call on global corporations (larger than TNCs) to implement the UN guidelines so they are seen as good, ethical corporate citizens
- . deal with corruption
- . develop a charter on sustainable consumption and development
- . develop industry tribunal and statutory body to deal with issues related to online financial services
- . examine the appropriateness of regulation and redress issues vis-a-vis service providers versus goods
- . give consumers a stronger voice