

# COALITION FOR ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT Sustainable Cultures – Cultures of Sustainability

## BACKGROUND PAPER 14

by

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### FREE TIME AND PROFITS

It has long been in an opinion at large that the consumerist living standards of the rich capitalist countries can't be universalised without inflicting irreparable damages on planetary eco-system. Hence, the "small islands of mass consumptions" which were earlier regarded as models of development for the underdeveloped countries or largely the countries of the South are seriously questioned for quite some time. The doubts revolve around the sustainability of such models as seen from an ecological point of view. Therefore, the challenge is to struggle, not just exclusion and exploitation, but also for secure livelihood standards and consumption norms that can be generalised to all. In fact, our task and the test are to look forward for alternative policies (and politics) that supports such generalisation.

We have witnessed the inability of the capitalist social relationship in translating technological and productive development into a richer and a more satisfying life for the human race. Capitalism's irrational use of technological potential generates a virtually universal interest in a democratic, non-capitalist society capable of putting this potential into a better use.

A number of studies have clearly shown the fact that beyond a certain level of income, the average reported level of life satisfaction in a given country or a region doesn't increase with the economic growth. This draws our attention to the limits and the confines of the *productivist* developmental paradigms. However, the existing accounts do not point to these disconnects. Instead they are largely focussed on consumption races, triggered by individual pursuit of 'positional' goods and the existence of a conflict on individual self-interest and the social outcomes. We must make clear the connections between such races and the huge wastes generated by consumerist patterns and the missed opportunity for enhanced human welfare that such waste entails taking into account both the material squander and the misuse of human potential.

It has been amply evidenced that human beings overworks, at times beyond their physical, emotional and psychological capacities, to sustain consumerist lifestyles even as a number of studies suggest that once a level of material comfort is attained, 'non-positional goods' such as free time, make a greater contribution to human welfare than additional consumption of material goods. However, labour productivity in the last hundred years

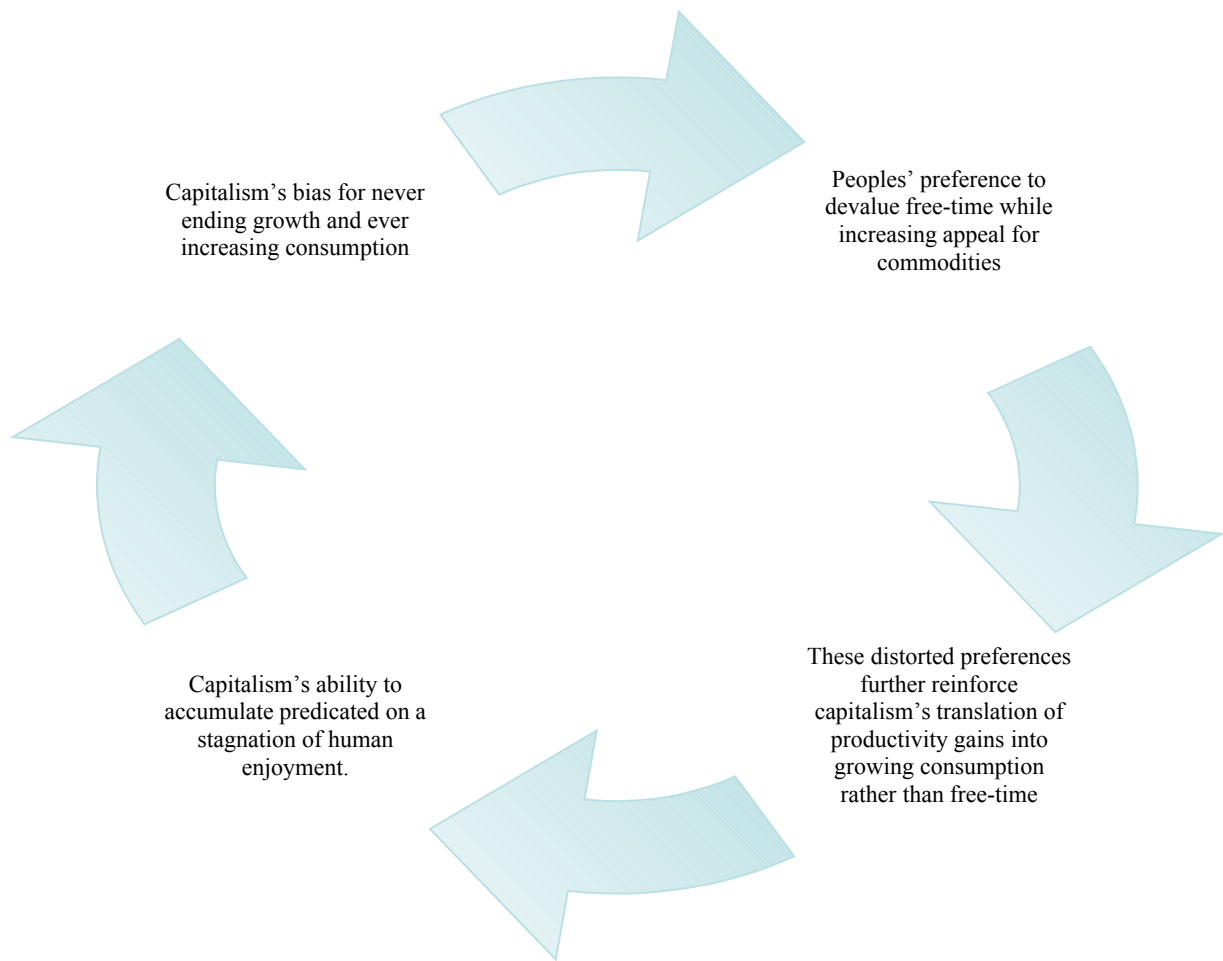
have overwhelmingly been translated into economic output and conspicuous consumption than shorter work-hours. This sufficiently demonstrates industrialism's supposed bias towards producing more goods than leisure. In fact, globally even in Europe, we witness the convergence towards 'flexible' American model that intensifies exploitation and reduces free time. This whole trade-off between production and free-time being resolved without "debate" is due to the enormous power enjoyed by capital to shape social developments or social course in accordance to its system and benefits. Therefore, the productivity gains, coming from the ever revolutionising technologies which are also benefits of successive human labour goes in favour of capital and not labour. This is because the fact that in case the productivity gains resulted in shorter working hours, the benefits of the increased productivity would have passed on to workers. However, the absence of economic growth would have resulted harder for the profits to grow. Although this is true for consumption as well as it might result in lower levels of consumption, the workers would be otherwise benefited as they have much more free time and are in command of more 'non-positional goods'. The reverse of this situation leads to growth of profits and the benefits come at no cost to the owners of capital. Thus capital is able to buy higher profits through other peoples' sacrifice of their free time and leisure. From the point of view of capital, shorter working hours can't be viewed as the ultimate conclusion of productivity gains since they siphon off these benefits in the directions of workers. There are enough historical forces since the early nineteenth century by which work came to be an end in itself.

It is important to raise demands for an alternative regulatory legal-political-social framework for a cap on maximum weekly work and also entrepreneurial re-organisation in co-operatives. In this context, the Erfurt programme written in 1891 is an important reference as it had idealised leisure time advocating shorter working hours and universality of education.

For mainstream economists, as well as social thinkers, the amount of work that people does is seen as a preference, as a sort of a 'free choice'. However, if the issue is analysed profoundly it will not be a matter of great surprise that options do not exist for the workers without paying a heavy economic penalty like lower pay rates. Hence, rigorous toil to eke out a living is not an alternative, but a compulsion for workers – both material and the hegemony of capital which makes it look like a 'god-given' natural order or a system.

Unnecessary longer working hours also drain people of their energy and they are left under-resourced to pursue in their free time creative activities, demanding and challenging, which can substantially increase satisfaction. However, in the absence of sufficient free-time people prefer low demanding activities, like going to shopping malls or watching televisions which are either consumption-intensive or expose to endless advertisements.

Thus there is a vicious cycle that can be summarised as follows:



The spectacle of the sales effort has evolved hand in hand to reinforce this consumerist pattern of 'growth'. In fact, the model couldn't have been so successful without the emergence of a rapidly growing apparatus for marketing commodities. The consumer culture is also capable of reducing labour resistance at work place and containing the tendencies of capitalist economic crisis by turning peoples' discontent with the fuel for further capital accumulation. Consumer fetishism also creates meritocratic illusions to separate people between winners and losers. It begets inequal class relations mediated by market competition and certain degree of socio-economic mobility leading credence to the ideological portrayal of those on top as worthy individuals who owe their success to talent and hard work. The examples could be very well the Tatas and Ambanis of India and Nokia of Finland.

In order to surmount this disproportionate assault by capital brought about by hordes of advertisements we have to think of alternative framework that radically reshapes the balance of forces. Let us imagine about another regulatory framework in which advertising on behalf of business was carried out by independent public bodies, not to pursue consumers but for providing reliable and trustworthy information for users. This might also include objective comparison of the advertised commodities to close substitutes. These

public bodies should be funded by the private companies but should be independent from any control by business houses.

From the above arguments one can clearly make links that unbridled consumerism resulting from the societal imbalance brought about by the tendencies of capital to multiply and grow through an ever increasing market, aggravates global environment problems along with other human problems. It does not contribute to an increase of peoples' life satisfaction beyond a certain limit. Therefore, a drastic revision of peoples' lifestyles does not entail a sacrifice that present generations have to make for future generations, but a matter of self-interest for present and future generations alike.

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Sustainable Cultures – Cultures of Sustainability is a study conducted by the Coalition for Environment and Development, Finland and funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. For more information see [http://www.ymparistojakehitys.fi/sustainable\\_societies.html](http://www.ymparistojakehitys.fi/sustainable_societies.html)