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## **Developing consumer citizenship**

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The stage of today's global community is cluttered with actors—fighting, killing, molesting, controlling, helping, cooperating and supporting one another. They represent the civil society, the political realm and the kings and emperors of the free market. Researchers such as Daniel Miller claim that the consumer is a global dictator on this stage and controls by his/her market choices the growth of the market and the direction of global development (Miller 1995). Other evidence suggests that the consumer is merely a pawn in a game of social acceptance, influenced greatly, if not entirely, by advertising and commercial pressures (Corrigan 1997).

Whether dictator or pawn, the consumer is a social force to be reckoned with on the complex international scene as well as in local and national arenas. The power the citizen-consumer represents can motivate constructive, collective actions or provide the fuel for destructive, egocentric campaigns. "Globalisation is integrating consumer markets around the world and opening opportunities. But it is also creating new inequalities and new challenges for protecting consumer rights...Ever expanding consumption puts strains on the environment and turns the affluence of some into the social exclusion of many." (UNDP 1998)

Developing consumer citizenship requires reflection on what democracy and citizenship are in principle, and on how democracy is connected to the market and to the consumer. It is also necessary to examine how teaching consumer citizenship differs from general citizenship education and traditional consumer education.

### **Democracy**

The most common definition of democracy is that of a form of governance anchored in popular representation, characterised by freedom of speech, freedom to organise, and the rule of law and order. Democracy is composed of patterns of social behaviour within specific structural settings that direct coexistence, facilitate exchange of opinions, contribute to transparency and accountability and define and revise the definitions of rights and responsibilities.

Democracy is a system of power distribution. It determines the limits of power certain institutions and individuals can exercise. The distribution of power inherent in democratic systems is also intended, in principle, to function as a tool for conflict resolution.

Democracy can also be described as an expression of collective ideals and aspirations. Due to the intrinsic flow of opinions from the citizen to the elected representatives, popular sovereignty is meant to ensure the constant modification of aims and goals to suit the altering conditions of societies (Ford 2001). Thus democracy in principle provides incentives, revises priorities, and creates common focuses.

### **Citizenship**

Citizenship is a form for social cooperation and identification, commonly understood as membership in a nation-state (Aleinikoff & Klusmeyer 2001). It is, as Mark Kingswell says, "a way of making concrete ethical commitments of care and respect" (Kingswell

2002). The citizen is the key figure in conceptualising and implementing a community's programs and policies. Citizenship is about a community's capacity to effect and manage change.

### **Democracy and the market**

Corporate, market-related entities and mass media are not always included in an overview presenting the elements of democratic governance. They are generally conceived as representing the private sector and are linked to the goal of individual profit-making. However, in today's tightly interconnected society, privately owned commercial businesses not only influence the manner in which nations acquire resources for governance and social welfare, but to a great extent also determine the nation's priorities for economic and social growth and resource usage (UNDP 1998). In many countries, corporate enterprises and mass media define 'acceptable' lifestyles and behaviour, and thereby exercise a decisive power in society. They contribute to the creation of identities and to the exchange of opinions.

The fact that corporate actors have such a dominating position in determining priorities and maintaining power in society has highlighted the need for improving the balance between freedom for commercial endeavours and the safeguarding of consumer rights, social development and environmental quality (IEA 2001). Should business control itself with voluntary codes of conduct and corporate ethical trade initiatives or should governments attach conditions and requirements to loans and investment grants? How can the grassroots activities of the consumer limit the power and authority of the private sector?

The following is a matrix model which describes in brief some of the basic elements of democracy in principle. It is constructed to show what institutions and citizens do in a democracy, the consequences of these actions and to give a brief overview of the reasons behind the actions. The arrows roughly indicate the existing currents of influence. As the matrix indicates, when the private sector is included it is possible to chart the multi-directional and to an extent, responsive flow from business to the individual to the government and *vice versa*.

**Figure 1**

	<b>Patterns</b>		<b>Power</b>		<b>Priorities</b>	
<b>Institutional</b>						
-executive (Cabinet)	-coordination		-control		-justice	
-legislative (Parliament)	-laws		-punishment		-peace	
	-tolls, tariffs		-exclusion		-national inflation control	
-judicial (Courts)	-trials		-incentives		-maintaining status quo	
	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑
<b>Private sector</b>						
-private (industries, businesses)	-production		-product supply		-economic growth	
	-employment		-resource usage			
	-investment		-image/lifestyle creation			
	-reinvestment		-price regulation			
- mass media	-information distribution		-profit		- sales, economic profit	
	-debate, advertising					
-public (interest organisations)	- information distribution				-accountability	
	-lobbying				-transparency	
	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑
<b>Individual</b>						
	-identity		-debate		-rights	
	-participatory governance		-electoral voting		-welfare	
	-need satisfaction		-referendum voting		-opportunities	
	-desire gratification		-product demand		-social acceptance	
			-production and sales accountability			
	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑

### Consumer citizenship

When swimming, bicycling or skiing, one adjusts one's balance, speed and reactions according to the physical conditions one encounters. In the modern global society the citizen must likewise adjust his/her patterns of behaviour, use of power and choice of priorities according to the social, economic and ecological conditions he/she encounters. Only a century ago, the focus of political involvement had mostly to do with production and employment policies. Today the focus has shifted to the options available to the consumer and the consequences of his/her choices (Scammell 2002). Repeated encouragement by governments to citizens "to produce and buy!" imply that consumption is a patriotic deed which strengthens the national economy and leads to growth and well being (Csikszentmihaly 2000).

Isin and Wood (1999) state that a new analysis of the role of the citizen must take into account the distinctive addition of the citizen's role as a consumer. A consumer, being a person who has made an agreement or a contract for a service or a commodity for personal use, has certain specific rights and responsibilities (Coalter 2002). Consumer rights are known. Consumer responsibilities are not so often enumerated. As with the responsibilities of the general citizen, the modern consumer can be expected to be an active, responsible participant in the development of a just and safe world; an individual who makes aware, critical choices in the marketplace which neither destroy the environment nor limit the development of other human beings.

### **The global consumer**

In this present age of cosmopolitans, jet-setters, immigrants, tourists, refugees and corporate cousins a large percentage of individuals' affiliations are related to or include a degree of commercial activities. Market research has identified 'global elites' such as teenagers, who have the same consumption styles and prefer global brands, be they of T-shirts, jeans, pop-music or videos (UNDP 1998). Global advertising spending is well over US\$435 billion per year. There is a constantly increasing flow of consumer products to new markets all over the globe. Competition to sell on an international scale is intense and aggressive as globalisation has become a corporate ideology along the lines of global liberalism.

Globalisation has brought magnificent improvements and veritable tragedies. Consumption is not equally distributed around the globe. Poor people and poor countries bear many of the costs of unequal consumption. "The world's dominant global consumers are overwhelmingly concentrated among the well-off, but the social and environmental damage from the world's uncontrolled consumption falls most severely on the poor" (UNDP 1998).

### **Global democracy**

The matrix presented in Figure 1 has a major shortcoming. As a didactic tool it reflects relationships and flows of influence which occur within a democratic society on local and national levels. However it ignores the global dimensions as well as the global intrusions on local and national systems and behaviour. The actors on the world stage have for centuries been preoccupied with their particular corner and nearest neighbours. This has now changed dramatically. Globalisation has increasingly assumed not only economic but also social, cultural and political dimensions.

A comprehensive analysis of the extent to which the world has been propelled towards global democracy is beyond the scope of this paper, but in brief the ascension of international professional and interest organisations have contributed to the dawn of global democracy as well as the political conflicts of the previous century and consequently the international peace movement. The establishment first of the League of Nations and later the United Nations and its associated organisations have been significant steps. The emergence of international law and a host of international treaties and agreements over the last fifty years is also clear testimony of a world community using democratic methods on a global scale to achieve common good (Huddleston 1989).

Embryonic institutions and organisations for the exercise of global democracy do exist, even though many are still in the preliminary stages of evolution. Patterns of global

democratic behaviour are also identifiable. This is not to deny the existence of counter forces using or threatening unlimited use of power, such as nationalism, ethnic revival, economic imperialism and militarism. Dual processes of separation and unification are at work simultaneously.

### **The world citizen-consumer**

An increasing number of actors on the world stage regard globalisation as the next and inevitable stage in mankind's evolution towards a world civilisation. According to many "The world is one country and mankind its citizens" (Bahai International Community 1998). Individuals - citizens from diverse nations - participate in global actions identical in many respects to the engagement in society referred to on a national level as citizenship. Institutional consultation and collaboration is common. Cooperation amongst the private sector, particularly the non-governmental organisations, is growing on all levels.

The essential difference between local/national citizenship and world citizenship is neither the patterns of behaviour nor the power wielded, but the priorities chosen. The world citizen, according to those who have together with the United Nations tried to propagate this concept, acts on the principle of the oneness of the human race, which encompasses tolerance and brotherhood, appreciation of the richness and importance of the world's cultural and social systems, and those traditions which contribute to a sustainable, global environment and world civilisation. When attitudes like these are firmly integrated into behaviour patterns - whether in relation to institutions, the private sector or to other individuals in a social setting - they provide the essential impulse that secures progress towards a just and safe world. It is the priorities of world citizenship that the world citizen-consumer must acquire, and this is the task of consumer citizenship training.

**Figure 2**

	<b>Patterns</b>	<b>Power</b>	<b>Priorities</b>
<b>Institutional</b> - United Nations, (UNEP, UNDP, UNESCO, etc.) E.U., OAS, ****,  - International courts and tribunals	-debates -declarations -conferences -reports -action plans -research  -international law -trials ↓            ↑	-influence inter-national opinion -economic sanctions -military actions -exclusion/inclusion  -approval, condemnation ↓            ↑	-peace -coexistence -human rights -relief aid -poverty eradication -sustainable human development -justice  ↓            ↑
<b>Private sector</b> -multinational companies  -WTO, IMF, WB, OPEC, ****  -mass media  -public interest organisations (NGOs)	Material profit Lack of ethical codes Resource dissipation Loan and debt growth from North to South Trade blocs and agreements  information exchange  Information dispersal Lobbying, demonstrating ↓            ↑	Economic and commercial influence   Psychological Influence  transparency accountability ↓            ↑	Economic development Expanded markets Controls by tariffs and tolls   Solidarity Ethical trade Environmental soundness ↓            ↑
<b>Individual</b> Citizens	Global identity Tourism, migration, study exchange, cybernetic and media updatedness ↓            ↑	Public opinion Market choices and product demand grassroots governance ↓            ↑	Solidarity Ethical trade Environmental Soundness ↓            ↑

### **Consumer citizenship training; civic training + consumer education**

The components of civic education are often identified as civic knowledge, civic skills and civic virtues (Patrick 2002). Consumer education has traditionally focused upon the role of the consumer and the ways of solving consumer-related problems based on the rights and responsibilities of the producer and consumer. Product quality, environmental impact and consumer safety have been central themes. As increasingly more educators realise that consumption of products and services determines social status and contributes to the creation of personal and group identity, consumer education has also come to deal with both understanding the symbolic value of commodities and services as well as how to function in relation to the system which produces, distributes and markets these.

Consumer citizenship education, if it is to be a key to global democracy, should include the following.

#### *Recognition of new patterns of cognitive understanding and moral development amongst today's children*

Modern society confronts children with sights, sounds and other sensory experiences and language codes which are multicultural, historically complex, morally diverse and most often unrelated to their earlier impressions. The process of integrating information into meaningful units of understanding becomes extremely elaborate, difficult, and for some distressing. The global culture demands of children quicker reactions, greater flexibility and more extensive creative capacities than ever before. In addition it requires more comprehensive morals in relation to daily activities in the market place.

#### *Awareness of children's and youth's pressing need to clarify their purpose in life*

To claim that 'economic imperialism has eroded the fabric of personal and collective dignity' is a striking accusation. None the less, millions believe that drinking a Coke, or smoking a Marlboro makes you more of a 'man' than by not doing so, or that wearing products from Gucci or Armani makes you more of a woman. Certain advertisements claim their products are worth "killing for" or even "dying for" - which some children and youths actually do.

Schools have the responsibility, together with parents and religious groups, to provide ways of stimulating reflection by the students on the commercial goals and practices of the consumer-centred society. Are the lifestyles that are marketed viable, meaningful and morally consistent? Do they contribute to the kind of society the student is interested in building or maintaining? How do such lifestyles fit the standards of world citizenship?

#### *Helping students gain insight into the processes and systems not only of democracy but also of human development on a global scale*

Consumer citizenship education must deal with how humankind can manage its resources, how conflicts can be solved and how we can contribute to the future. Students must develop hindsight; historical understanding into the growth of today's global society. Which systems and processes must be maintained and which are defective and in need of alteration? What is the individual's role in relation to the larger mechanisms of governments and the private sector? How can the citizen-consumer influence production, distribution, marketing and sales? Which rights and responsibilities exist and which are lacking for oneself and for others? How can changes be made, by whom and when?

### *Motivating students to put positive attitudes into action*

Being a concerned, active citizen-consumer on local, national and global levels is often bewildering and frustrating. A recently published UNESCO/UNEP research report, *Is the Future Yours?* asked 10,000 middle class young people in 24 countries about their consumer attitudes and habits. Only a small minority were willing to consider engaging in some form of social activism in order to improve present conditions in the world. Approximately 36% preferred to effect changes by personal actions such as the choices they make when shopping. Pessimism, apathy, and hopelessness seem to be as extensive as loud, violent protests.

Families and schools face the challenge of nurturing students' self confidence and creativity. Teachers must convey the conviction that the system can be modified to meet the complex tests of the future. Students need to be encouraged by learning of positive examples of crisis turned into success.

### **Conclusion**

Tomorrow's actors on the stage of the global community will have been educated by teachers of today who struggle to articulate the priorities of the future. By developing the concept of consumer citizenship and relating it to the phenomena of global democracy, there is an opportunity to direct powerful social forces into constructive channels.

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