Consumers as caretakers
-- social responsibility in a commercialized world

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The dynamics and the dialectics of global development are breathtaking. New products, new problems, and new possibilities emerge almost overnight. It is not only leaders of the world who recognize how small the distances between people and markets have become. Youth in the Congo jungles buy their Samsung cell phones, villagers in the mountains of Chile watched the Olympics in Beijing on their televisions, and workers in Siberia notice the effects of climate change on the melting tundra under their feet.

The global market and the environmental effects of consumption are clearly “drivers” pushing the international community towards new forms of organisation and cooperation. As the Human Development Report tells us:

- The world’s dominant consumers are overwhelmingly concentrated among the well-off, but the environmental damage from the world’s consumption falls most severely on the poor.
- Competitive spending and conspicuous consumption turn the affluence of some into the social exclusion of many.
- Poor people and poor countries bear many costs of unequal consumption.
- Globalization is creating new inequalities and new challenges for protecting consumer rights.

The global community is already well into the countdown toward the Millennium Goals and according to the UNDP Human Development Report it has been:

“A decade of accelerated development but a decade of lost opportunity, half-hearted endeavour and failed international cooperation”

There has been an increase in prosperity but less impressive gains in human development. Statistics indicate greater preoccupation with the messages of the entertainment media than with the conditions of fellow inhabitants on the globe as described by facts like these: “on current indicators a child born in Zambia today has less chance of surviving past age 30 than a child born in England in 1840” “The present demographic shock of AIDS exceeds that of the first WW.” “Nearly two-thirds of the ecosystems services on which human society depends are being degraded or used unsustainably.”

1 UNDP Human Development Report 1998
2 UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, introduction
4 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment
The last century has seen repeated calls for the development of “a profound sense of responsibility for the fate of the planet and for the well-being of the entire human family”\(^5\). Such a sense of global responsibility is seen by many as a first step towards releasing the resources necessary for sustainable, human development. It is considered the basis of unity of thought for building lasting peace among nations and it is recognized as the true indicator of human integrity. It is regarded as the key to improved international cooperation.

But what exactly is meant by social responsibility today and how can consumers exercise it in their everyday interaction with the market? Do the new definitions of social responsibility call for rethinking the role of the consumer and revising of priorities leading to growth and prosperity nationally as well as internationally? To identify social responsibility as it recognized today, it is useful first to reflect upon a few of the most prominent theories of social responsibility and then to examine some of the existing processes which continue to determine what social responsibility is today.

**Determinants of socially responsible behaviour**

The task of taking care of oneself, one’s family and surroundings has been a vital part of survival since human beings came into existence. Sociobiological theories based on the biological determination of actions and emotions, (Edward Wilson 1971) connect processes such as caring, defending, sheltering, feeding and educating to natural motivation associated with functioning in a physical environment. Mr. Neanderthal may not have known what was taking place on the other side of the globe, but he was definitely able to prepare and respond to what was happening close at hand. Taking responsibility and caring for kin or group members is considered by these theoreticians as being an instinctive reaction to possible threats.

A related approach, which falls under the category of utilitarianism\(^6\), claims that practical conditions demand reactions which can be classified as caring or “responsible” since they stem from a response to an event or situation connected to practical necessities. Another way of describing this approach is that there is the need for constant action to avoid degeneration. Existence is dependent on effort. Without food, we starve to death. Without mobilizing energy, we stagnate. Without involvement, community life dissolves. Without sufficient stewardship, our natural environment dies.

Civilization has evolved in complex ways and social systems have not only been motivated purely by biological or physical awareness. Social systems require the development of functional competences which help the individual members to contribute to the maintenance of the existence of the group to which they belong. The dialectic relationship of the individual to the group creates limits to acceptable behaviour and defines identities. Social interaction is considered a main source of encouragement. In other words, caring and being responsible become ways of indicating commitment to the group and gaining mutually satisfying rewards (be they money, services, goods or intangibles like information, status, or love). Theories supporting this are often referred to as social-exchange theories (Thibaut & Kelly 1959, Foa & Foa 1974)

Theories of social constructivism can be seen as an extension of social-exchange theories. The individual is considered a product of how others experience him/her. The dialectics of interaction create personalities and form behaviour. One consequence of this approach to

\(^5\) Bahai International Community 1993

\(^6\) John Stuart Mills (1806-73)
socially responsible behaviour can be the individual’s total rejection of responsibility: “I am only a product of how others see me and therefore my behaviour is entirely everyone else’s fault.” Responsibility becomes transferred to those who “construct” the individual’s personality. Another consequence is the individualist conviction that “My fate depends only on myself. I can blame no one for failures and shortcomings.” (Bruckner 1995) This leads to a guilt-laden attitude to responsibility in which the individual alone feels ultimately responsible for absolutely everything.

Despite these two extremes, many scientists agree that normative social influence combined with what some refer to as natural altruistic and empathic actions (when a person without apparent gain acts to reduce the distress of another person) form the basis for what is often called “prosocial” behaviour. (Batson & Olesen 1991) However research indicates that prosocial behaviour seems to dissipate when situations provide the opportunity for diffusion of responsibility. In cases where studies have been made of information interpretation and individual initiatives, a significant percent of those tested failed to respond to potential danger when in the presence of others. (Latane & Darley 1968)

This has lead to theories on the cumulative processes of prosocial behaviour, in which individuals learn from experience how to react responsibly in given settings. Thus the “nature-nurture” dilemma applies as well to the challenge of acting responsibly. Learning prosocial behaviour occurs in part through trial and error and in part through conceptualizing desired outcomes of situations. Awareness of social responsibility evolves as society’s notions of care and concern, of righteousness and justice expand.

Political systems (be they representative democracies or totalitarian dictatorships) go to great lengths to define visions of desired futures. Political doctrines provide moral imperatives. They emphasize the necessity of the citizen’s active participation in order for their system to function. Rules of conduct are often delineated in constitutions and charters. In democracies, who has responsibility for what is identified in general terms. Courts and laws exist to further determine who has the task of carrying out specific actions. Individual-, corporate- and governmental responsibility evolve from the priorities of a given period. Internationally, the existing human rights declaration has in many countries been accepted as a common denominator for acceptable priorities. Similarly, other international treaties and pacts reflecting public opinion and the will of the constituents have influenced the existing definitions of responsibility.

Religions have, throughout the ages, also provided humankind with visions of the “ideal society” and the “noble individual”. Responsibility has been characterized as a source of integrity and moral obligation. The golden rule, in whichever religious expression, emphasizes this. Responsibility has been the cornerstone of nobility and is considered to be based on love and faith. The morals of religions are long term commitments rather than short term personal involvements. Religious leaders have provided “hard core principles”, fixed standards, as opposed to sets of soft values which can be modified under varying circumstances. The morals which religions expound often function as a measuring stick or goal post against which individuals can evaluate their attitudes and actions.

By looking even more closely at the role of religion in providing moral imperatives for responsible actions, one must acknowledge the fact that religion, based on acceptance of Divine revelation, sees ultimate authority as resting with God rather than the individual or society. Those who believe divine revelation to be a singular historical event often encounter
difficulties when identifying responsible behaviour for present day situations based on century old explanations. For those who accept the notion of progressive revelation, God continually unveils for humankind the principles of an ever advancing civilization. Thus the religious guidelines (or moral directives) can remain updated and relevant, offering spiritual guidance for responsible responses

Characteristics of social responsibility today
What characterizes being responsible today? Answers to this differ according to which cultural group one belongs to. In today’s multicultural societies a consensus on what responsible behaviour is, reflects the diversity of the community’s cultural composition. There are also strong temporal criteria connected to defining who has responsibility for what. The pendulum swings from left to right and back again in the political realms around the world. It also swings between spheres of public and private responsibility. Additionally, the last decade has had watershed events which have drastically altered the map of responsibility.

Despite these variations, socially responsible behaviour in modern society can be traced to basic values and the way in which these are comprehended and exercised. Empathy, trust, respect, cooperation, moderation, courage, commitment are of the most central. Jerome Binde calls these “serious values versus frivolous values”. These values reflect society’s “confidence in humanity’s collective capacity to transcend material conditions.” They constitute the foundation of global ethics. Without the conviction that people are potentially able to move beyond materialism, greed, egoism and short-sightedness, the concept of social responsibility becomes limited. “Confidence in humanity’s capacity to transcend material conditions”, stems from the realization that humankind can and must:

1. fundamentally redefine human relationships
2. reorganize human affairs
3. radically reorder priorities
4. fundamentally reshape the institutions of society
5. empower humankind through a vast increase in access to knowledge… and intensify dialogue between science and religion
6. extend the reach of human abilities
7. use consultation as the organizing principle of every project

The global ethics which are being embraced by individuals, businesses, organizations and governments around the globe are not a form of philosophy, religion or politics from one particular region, nor are they any single person’s description of what “ought to be”. They have their roots and inspiration in the soil of many religions, cultures, guidelines and words of wisdom from all corners of the globe. But what is fascinating is that the set of global ethics which have resulted in the Millennium Development Goals and are most often referred to as “sustainable development” and “social responsibility” are the collective results of the negotiations and dialogue between many individuals trying to identify what “progress”, “growth”, and “good life quality” is and what “the future of humankind” should look like. The definition of “development” has been undergoing transformation. Civilization has gone “beyond GDP”, as the indicator of progress and true wealth. Research shows that once basic needs are met, happiness and contentment are not always dependent on continually increasing

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7 The future of Values, UNESC and Berghahn Books, 2004
9 GDP=Gross Domestic Product
10 Ottar Hellevik, Jakten på den Norske Lykken, 2008
material wellbeing. “Sustainability”, a complicated concept understood in many different ways, is now generally accepted as the safeguarding of basic values of honesty, integrity, compassion, justice, freedom and peace against the dominance of greed, fraud, excess and violence. It also includes the “efficient and wise use of the earth’s resources in order to secure the basic human requirements for existence, the highest quality of life and equitable social and economic development.” It involves “commitment to building a humane and caring global society, cognizant of the need for human dignity for all”.

The consumer as a caretaker
In light of the emergence of global ethics and definitions of social responsibility which encompass the well-being of citizens in all countries, the role of the consumer has begun to change. The very name, “consumer” indicates an individual who devours and uses up resources. Many have tried to modify the name and thereby broaden the definition of the consumer. References such as the “conscientious consumer”, the “ethical consumer”, the “critical consumer”, etc. are well-known. Another example which has gained widespread popularity in recent years is the “consumer citizen” who by definition is considered to be:

A consumer citizen is an individual who makes choices based on ethical, social, economic and ecological considerations. The consumer citizen actively contributes to the maintenance of just and sustainable development by caring and acting responsibly on family, national and global levels.

A “caring consumer who acts responsibly” is per definition someone who is “mindful, considerate, helpful and active”, aware of the consequences of what they buy and do. Being “considerate” involves weighing alternatives and making choices which are beneficial not only oneself but to the common good. The definition of a caretaker also includes being someone who tries to find and use positive solutions. This framework of normative behaviour is based upon accepted definitions of “social responsibility” and related terms such as “accountability”, “transparency”, “trust” and “sphere of influence”. New examples of how to be an active, socially responsible consumer citizen are evident when one examines the increase in the creation of voluntary codes, in participation in civil society organizations and activities, increased stakeholder involvement and the development of relevant education.

Voluntary Codes
The fact that institutions grow slowly, adjusting to situations rather than existing as perfect ideological models, has lead to the adoption of many “soft-laws” or voluntary codes of behaviour as instruments for social responsibility. These spring in part from what some researchers refer to as a “timeframe acceleration” (a legislative Dopler effect) in which there is a significant time lag between the public demand for legislation and the enacting and enforcing of such legislation.

Voluntary codes are “commitments not required by legislation or regulations. They are agreed upon by one or more individuals or organizations and are intended to influence or control behaviour. They are to be applied in a consistent manner or to reach a consistent outcome.” Voluntary codes have, as Benjamin Cashore explains, pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy. They tend to be innovative and serve as a new framework for expressing policy

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12 The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, (WSSD 2002)
13 The Consumer Citizenship Network Teaching and Learning Guidelines, 2005
rules based on multi-stakeholder opinions. They are characterized by having either information-oriented approaches, dialogue-oriented and participatory approaches or a combination of these. While not obligatory, codes can provide a means of identifying the commitments of a company, government or organization and can even provide a competitive advantage. In many cases voluntary codes build upon the recognition of the diversity of existing national legislation, the interdependence of the global community and the essential unity of mankind.

Voluntary codes, often created by a coalition of representatives from stakeholders, government and corporate interests, have been created to act as catalysts for social responsibility and as supplements to officially approved legislation. “There is a hybridization of law and market, a blurring of the distinctions separating public and private spheres” Conventions and voluntary codes have evolved in an attempt to identify indicators of social responsibility for governments, corporate enterprises and civil society organizations.

Numerous voluntary codes and strategies have been created and some adopted. One which addresses the issue of social responsibility directly is the Universal declaration of human responsibilities. Others, such as the Implementation Plan of the Johannesburg World Summit and Agenda 21, are more well-known. Parallel to the creation and adoption of national and international strategies and partnerships for sustainable development there has been a growing consensus on the need for a definition of “social responsibility”. One definition of social responsibility which is being worked on at present by the International Standards Organization in the draft of the ISO 26000 is: “the responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on the society and environment, through transparent and ethical behaviour that contributes to sustainable development, health and welfare of society, takes into account the expectations of stakeholders, is in compliance with applicable law and consistent with international norms of behaviour and is integrated throughout the organization and practiced in its relationships with all within its sphere of influence.” In other words, social responsibility challenges us to make our vision wider, our horizons more encompassing and our decisions more thoroughly thought through than ever before. The global community is to be considered as “one family”.

**Civic participation and stakeholder involvement**

Only a century ago, the focus of political involvement mostly had to do with production and employment policies. “Business has overtaken politics as the primary shaping force in society…” claims Anita Roddick. Today the focus has shifted to the options available to the consumer and the consequences of his/her choices. Repeated encouragement by governments to citizens “to produce and buy!” implies that consumption is a patriotic deed which strengthens the national economy and leads to growth and well being. Critical reactions to commercial initiatives have been considered “unpatriotic”. Two types of behaviour are increasing: one is civic participation by protest (activities such as signing petitions, boycotting products, demonstrating, staging sit-ins, etc, aimed at giving signals to those in command without necessarily going via the elected representatives.) The second type of behaviour is participation by association (where citizens come together to lobby and further their ideas, opinions, interests directly without going through the normal decision making channels)

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15 Webb, Kernaghan, ed; Voluntary Codes, private governance, the public interest and innovation; Carlton University; Canada; 2005.
16 ISO-SR 26000 working draft 4
“By means of their purchasing power and ethical buying strategies, consumers can potentially give organizations incentives to operate more socially responsibly. For consumers to use their purchasing power as incentives, and to act ethically, they need credible, comparable and reliable information about the social responsibility of organizations.” Consumers International 2006

There are several reasons for the growth of stakeholder involvement in recent decades. The significant increase in the number of democracies in recent years has strengthened the role of the active citizen. The growth of digital communication as a means of expressing one’s opinions has provided activists and interest organizations with powerful tools. Media have even begun to referring to “the user revolution”. The fact that corporate actors have such a dominant 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. The inbuilt sensitivity of the global market to consumer decisions has transformed the consumer into a strategic economic force to be reckoned with. There is increased public interest in assuring that firms, governments and organizations behave in a more balanced, socially responsible manner and report publicly on their behaviour. There is also heightened sensitivity to information about how the consequences of production and consumption affect not only one’s nearest family, friends, or colleagues but also human beings all over the globe. The consequences of our lifestyle choices are being measured in many ways such as by ecological footprints.

Today stakeholders are still “lay judges” but in new contexts. Such participation opens for a more multilateral system empowering those on the bottom, allowing “functions (to) be carried out at the level closest to the people affected” (Strong, M.P. 1995). In addition to representing the user perspective (children, pupils, students, adults, disabled, marginalized, elderly), stakeholders can provide alternative, locally and culturally solvent solutions.

Several standards for stakeholder involvement identify essential elements of the stakeholder consultation process. These can be summarized as such.  

- **V** stakeholders have the right to be heard
- **V** the organization is obligated to respond to the stakeholders’ concerns
- **V** stakeholder engagement should be principles-based, using an open source framework for stakeholder engagement
- **V** there should be systems and processes available to ensure constant improvement in the quality of stakeholder involvement
- **V** there should be the opportunity for stakeholders to be involved in issues ranging from the micro-level of specific engagements to macro-level involvement in major societal concerns

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18 Consumers International 2006
19 Ostrom, Ellinor; IHDP Update vol 3/2001 “Vulnerability and Polycentric governance systems”
stakeholder involvement should be practiced by businesses, civil society and labour organizations, public bodies and multi-stakeholder networks and partnerships.

**Shared responsibility**

What is unique about the set of global ethics evolving in modern society today based on new definitions of social responsibility is that it recognizes that changes demand constant updating of how ethical principles are applied. This task which was once the priority and major responsibility of leaders has become a shared responsibility between decision makers and stakeholders. Systems and processes are being put in place to facilitate this.

> “While governments are expected to take the lead, other stakeholders are just as important to ensure success in achieving sustainable development. The need couldn’t be more urgent and the time couldn’t be more opportune, with our enhanced understanding of the challenges we face, to act now will safeguard our own survival and that of future generations.”  

There is a “bottom up” increase in participatory action. As the Japanese White Paper on the National Lifestyle (2007) states: “Awareness about contributing to society is growing, and many people wish to take part in community activities”.

Another factor is the development of what is considered to be “good governance”. People on the grass-root level have in recent years increasingly demanded to be involved in two-way dialogue on public concerns. It is a sign of growing awareness of public administration in countries with long and strong traditions in centralized and top-down governance to acknowledge and enlist the assistance of those who are affected by the decisions which are made. Resisting the polarization of ideas, those closest to where changes are happening want to be included in the decision making process. This speaks for a more multilateral system empowering those on the bottom, allowing “functions (to) be carried out at the level closest to the people affected” (Strong, M.P. 1995).

The following diagram provides an overview of the dialectic relationship between policy makers and consumers as stakeholders.

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20 Geo-4, UNEP 2007
The modern concept of stakeholder involvement is not based only on concern for negative consequences although the lessons we are learning about destruction of the environment and climate change are serious and clearly coloured with anxiety about the future. Stakeholder involvement is per definition, proactive rather than merely reactive. It is constructive and cooperative rather than merely accusative.

**Expectations towards the market in relation to socially responsible behaviour**

Across the globe the concern has been expressed for increased social responsibility on the part of the market. Environmental codes, ethical standards and indicators of corporate social responsibility have been created and, in some instances been, accepted in varying degrees by corporations. Yet the goals of sustainable human development have not yet become closely coupled with the purely profit-oriented goals of economic prosperity. This is also reflected in the short-term perspectives of many market activities from raw material exploitation to limited waste reduction. There is still the need for long-term perspectives such as those enunciated at the World Summit on Social Development where the slogan was “put poor people first”. A vital step in this direction is to ensure greater market transparency and accountability. Life-cycle analysis and labelling are essential elements in this process. They contribute to improving the individual’s ability to use consumer spending power constructively.

Consumers, have come to expect that governments, businesses and organizations should exercise transparency and be accountable. Decision-makers, however, also have expectations towards stakeholders. This is only natural and just. If stakeholders, and particularly consumers, are to be influential actors they must have the awareness, knowledge and competence to carry out this role.

".... To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow; to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds. And to those nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say we can no longer afford indifference to suffering outside our borders; nor can we consume the world's resources without regard to effect. For the world has changed, and we must change with it." President Barak Obama (Jan 2009)
Education’s contribution

“The tasks entailed in the development of a global society call for levels of capacity far beyond anything the human race has so far been able to muster. Reaching these levels will require an enormous expansion in access to knowledge, on the part of individuals and social organizations alike. Universal education will be an indispensable contributor to this process of capacity building, but the effort will succeed only as human affairs are so reorganized as to enable both individuals and groups in every sector of society to acquire knowledge and apply it to the shaping of human affairs.”

Former U.N. Secretary General, Kofi Annan stated: “Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that sounds abstract—sustainable development—and turn it into a reality for all of the world’s people…This is essentially an educational enterprise.” This is because leaders of governments, CEO’s, activists, and everyday consumers are all exposed to some form of educational experience. Education for responsible consumption involves rethinking definitions of human needs and desires. It encompasses the principles of moderation and sufficiency as means of curbing social, economic and environmental imbalances and of stimulating responsible consumption. Responsible consumption is founded on the principle of the oneness of humanity and the right of all to have their basic needs met.

Initiatives for teaching social responsibility have already been taken by many educational institutions. Some educational institutions have committed themselves to the further development of analytical, reflective thinking skills in order to decode the extensive and aggressive commercial messages to which individuals around the world are constantly exposed. By stimulating foresight and consequence analysis, testing alternative scenarios, and facilitating the flow of knowledge, research is improving the quality of education about social responsibility.

The main chores remain. One is how to teach controversial issues, to galvanize social involvement and to encourage unity of purpose, consultation and innovation. Conflicts are inherent in this kind of work and training as to how to handle opposition and frustration and turn it into constructive energy has been included in some teacher training courses.

The individual’s obligations

The new definitions of social responsibility stem from the acknowledgement that it is a civic duty to be a conscientious, “noble” consumer citizen and that one’s efforts can make a positive difference.

“Humanity has the capacity for great feats of heroism and self-sacrifice. At the same time, it has baser tendencies toward materialism, greed, and violence. For humanity’s nobility to emerge, its qualities of trustworthiness, compassion, selflessness, dedication, loyalty, sacrifice, and service need to be nurtured and gain

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23 Kofi Annan UN press release 15/03/01
24 Victoria W. Thoresen, Here and Now, Education for Sustainable Consumption, UNEP/Marrakech Task Force for ESC, 2008
Individuals are increasingly more able to articulate their visions. Critical reflection is being used to form the baseline for personal indicators of responsible lifestyles. Just as the UN is greening its institutions and some governments, organizations and businesses are “greening” their behaviour, many individuals are challenging themselves to align their beliefs and words with their actions and not only “greening” their lives but committing themselves to acting as world citizens.

Of course, many ask “why should I care?”, “what can I do?”, “what will it cost me to be involved?”—in other words: “what’s in it for me?” Such questions are a way of analyzing the risks and benefits and are answered in different ways by different actors who are trying to motivate stakeholder involvement. Incentives for stakeholder involvement are often money, services, goods or intangibles like information, status, or love. In many cases it stems from the will to cooperate and a deep sense of commitment. “This business of human development in the world is our business” some stakeholders even claim.

**Benefits of responsibility-sharing in a globalized society**

The benefits of responsibility-sharing are described as being:
- better policy coherence on all levels;
- shorter distances to decision makers and earlier,
- more streamlined opportunities to influence;
- greater social and market resilience to unexpected events; and
- increased trustworthiness and individual integrity for all involved.

This effort to build unity based upon frank and critical consultation and the practice of a wider range of responsible lifestyles is envisaged as a step on the path to global citizenship. On another level, benefits may be seen as providing the antidote for what has become known as “Affluenza”. Affluenza is a metaphoric virus, “a set of values which increase our vulnerability to emotional stress. It entails placing a high value on acquiring money and possessions, looking good in the eyes of others and wanting to be famous.”

The concept of affluenza as a condition of many people today is based on WHO data about emotional stress in which it is indicated that inhabitants of the industrialized, English speaking world is twice as prone to depression, anxiety and addictions than people in other developed countries.

Responsibility is the pulse of human society. It is stimulated by vision, set in motion by awareness, realized through action and regulated by inner values, social norms, and/or legal criteria. Social responsibility is based on complex processes of initiatives, reactions, interventions and revisions. A responsible consumer, acting as a care-taker of our global community, reflects upon the existing definitions of responsibility, identifies the systems and processes by which he/she can exercise their responsibility and thereby contribute, individually and collectively, to more sustainable human development.

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25 Baha’u’llah, quoted by the Office of social and economic development, Baha’i World Center, Haifa, Israel; Palabra publications USA, 2000
26 Affluenza, Oliver James, Vermilion Publishing 2007
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