



Environmental Justice and the Culture of Consumption

Consumption refers to any resource, good, or product that is purchased, taken, or used by an individual or household

The culture of consumption describes cultural pressure to consume unnecessary resources, goods, and products—a culture where what a person consumes defines what they do, what they value, and how they are perceived



Key Environmental Threats

- **Climate Change:** The IPCC writes that “Low energy demand and low demand for land- and GHG-intensive consumption goods” will be necessary to limit warming to 1.5°C.
- **Biodiversity and Ecosystem Loss:** Land conversion for infrastructure, agriculture, and other development is often driven by demand for additional consumption and contributes to biodiversity loss and ecosystem loss and our capacity to store carbon.
- **Resource Overuse:** Currently, we are consuming more natural resources than the earth can renew, exceeding planetary limits in order to support high consumption.
- **Pollution and Contamination:** High levels of consumption result in high levels of waste, pollution, and chemical contamination, both when products are produced and after they are discarded.

Under-resourced communities experience:

- Less agency over consumption choices
 - Due to higher costs associated with consuming certain products
 - Due to restrictions on their ability to shape their surroundings—for example, renters have less agency over water and energy use
 - Due to reduced availability of certain consumption options in their area
- More frequent exposure to pollution and chemical contamination through their consumption
- Loss of culture, community, and wellbeing in the face of consumerism and materialism
- Greater financial stress as a result of social pressure to consume certain products and services, including higher rates of debt

Reports



[Equiterre: Reducing consumption to address socio-environmental challenges](#)

“Human health, well-being and social justice are also undermined by the frenetic pace of our economic system. Some people have too much, others not enough. The time has come for a paradigm shift in which we rethink our consumption and collective priorities.”



[Greenpeace: Growing the Alternatives](#)

“Unfettered capitalism has brought us to the brink of environmental and social collapse, exposing the flaws in the current socio economic system. This cannot be resolved without addressing the root causes of ever-increasing inequality between the vast wealth of a small minority and the financial hardship experienced by the majority of people on the planet.”



[Canada: SDG 12, Responsible consumption and production](#)

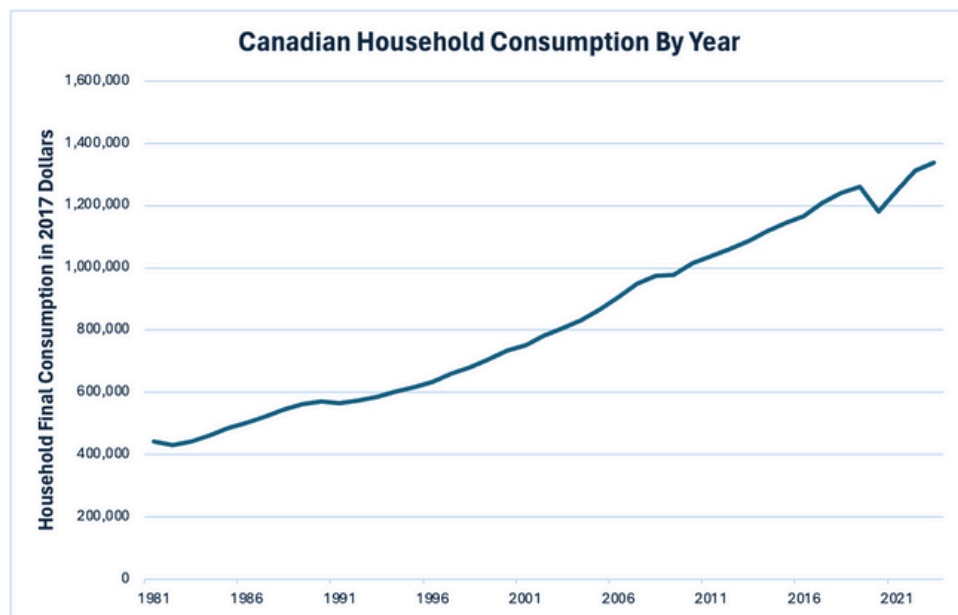
“SDG 12 aims to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns. It is about doing more and better with less. It is also about decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation and harms to human health, increasing resource efficiency and promoting sustainable lifestyles. This is tied to the concept of a circular economy, a transformative economic model that provides a framework for sustainable management of materials and energy across the economy.”



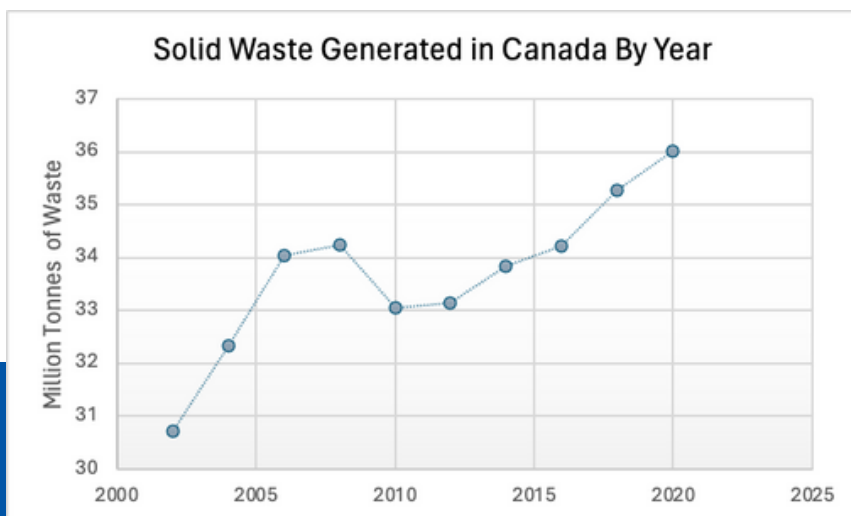
The Culture of Consumption by the Numbers



“Today, a country’s economic growth is used as an indicator of living standards. In other words, the higher a country ranks on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) list, the better the prospects for that country. But that is far from reality when the wellbeing of people and nature is considered.” - **Greenpeace, *Growing the Alternatives***



Based on Data From [Statistics Canada - Table 36-10-0124-01](#)



Based on Data From [Statistics Canada - Solid waste diversion and disposal, Canada, 2002 to 2020](#)





Deconsumption

Deconsumption refers to the practice of consuming fewer material goods by avoiding new purchases, repairing existing products, and sharing products with others

Deconsumption may be less accessible to under-resourced communities

- There are demonstrable disparities in consumption choices, with under-resourced communities less likely to access certain forms of clean energy, durable products, and local food
- Deconsumption takes time, energy, and knowledge that may be difficult to access in under-resourced communities
- Some policies aiming to reduce consumption rely on increasing costs of products that are damaging to the environment, which disproportionately harms under-resourced communities

To make deconsumption more accessible...

- Ensure deconsumption policies avoid placing unfair burdens on under-resourced communities
- Consider how options for deconsumption can be made accessible for communities where cost restricts consumption choices and where lifestyle changes may be particularly difficult
- Recognize where under-resourced communities are already exemplifying deconsumption ideals, while also acknowledging that for some communities low consumption is not by choice but rather a result of financial necessity

