Assignment 1- Essay

Q: Discuss the idea that ‘overconsumption in both developed and developing nations’ is a serious threat to true sustainability

It can be said that a growing trend of overconsumption, particularly in Western industrialised nations, is rising considerably. This phenomena extends to a wide range of goods and products which at one time were built to be repaired and reused, but now deemed too expensive to do so, are simply tossed aside to make way for a brand-new version of themselves. Additionally, it can be said that in particular developed nations, individuals consume and purchase far too many products which are all too quickly consumed and not reused, repaired or recycled; and after their usefulness has passed are simply discarded or sent to landfill refuse sites. The overconsumption of goods and products therefore is seen as a true threat to achieving sustainability in the 21st century and will continue to be ever more problematic until action is taken to curb this trend. As populations rise and become more affluent and developed, the overconsumption of goods and natural resources generally tends to grow exponentially, and in many cases, unsustainably leads to serious consequences. This essay will therefore discuss some of the main reasons why overconsumption has become a worrying issue and a detrimental trend in major industrialised nations. Furthermore, possible strategies in which to reduce this growing epidemic in the future will be outlined and explored.

The reasons for overconsumption in developed nations could be said to be somewhat complex and not only linked to many countries’ greater affluence but also to the satisfaction of individual’s personal needs. Bourdieu (1984) states that in modern society, consumer patterns and buying behaviour represent an individual’s way of expressing the particular group to which they identify with in society. However, it could be stated that the main reasons for this increasing trend tend to be linked to industrially developed and developing nations generally becoming more affluent, as well as the rise of modern machinery which can produce goods more cheaply and efficiently than ever before. A further factor could also be outlined in that a globalised economy is helping to buy and exchange goods on an immense international scale which is further enhanced through global Internet trading and increased economies of scale in modern manufacturing. Consequently, it can be deduced that it is mainly these phenomena which are driving the overconsumption of goods in modern day society. Pape et al. (2011, p. 26) state that ‘overconsumption in industrialised countries still presents major challenges to achieving sustainable development goals’ and it is vital that governments begin to recognise this. The authors go on to state that increased household
consumption in richer nations has been identified as a ‘key contributing factor to global problems such as climate change, depletion of energy resources and biodiversity loss’ (Pape et al. 2011, p. 27).

It should also be stated that this practice of overconsumption cannot be sustained in the long-term future and that the consumption of natural resources and fossil fuels for manufacturing at this present rate cannot continue either. It is clear then that action and ‘mindfulness’ regarding this trend of rapid consumption needs to be undertaken, as well as ensuring that ‘emerging’ developing countries and the increasing middle classes which inhabit them do not also follow similar unsustainable consumer practices that Western countries display.

There are several ways that industrialised nations at large could attempt to reduce individuals’ consumption of too many products. Firstly, perhaps, the importance of developing ‘behavioural change’ along with a possible return to the previous generations’ days of fixing and repairing faulty or damaged goods would be one way of reducing the amount of electrical goods (so-called e-waste) that are often discarded (Gillett & Higgs 2009; Pape et al. 2011). Furthermore, to increase and actively promote full recycling (as well as the government legislation to endorse it) within the home/organisation so as to more effectively reduce paper and energy misuse would be of immense added benefit. Schafer, Jaeger-Erben and Dos Santos (2011) and Seri (2009) all state that society needs to understand the dangers of producing and over-utilising too many precious resources in the needless overproduction of goods and the potential devastating environmental effects that will subsequently occur. This is further complemented by the idea from Mason (2004) who argues that:

The consumerist lifestyle feeds itself through spiralling desire from material gratification that can never be stated and that attention should turn to opposing today’s excessive consumerism by focusing on the benefits of a lifestyle of moderation and self-restraint. This should be of key focus to all. (p. 52).

This may be an idealist’s viewpoint. However, its key message has some significant merit and certainly to address this problem a change in human behaviour and attitude must first be realised.

In conclusion therefore, the issue of overconsumption in industrialised nations and its link to sustainability is one which needs much debate. It also requires significant behavioural change coupled with government action and legislation. This essay has discussed some of the main reasons for overconsumption in these countries in the 21st century and as such, unless action is taken, the...
effects on natural resources will take a devastating toll. Although the reasons for this trend can be described as somewhat complex, they are generally classified and linked to the development of richer, faster growing developed nations and societies with more disposable income to buy cheaper mass-produced items. Therefore, in terms of trying to reduce consumption rates within the growing worldwide population, it is strongly recommended that society in general and particularly richer countries move towards buying less, recycling more, increased repair of damaged/faulty goods and a general and significant move away from fast manufacturing and over-consuming types of behaviour. This is no ‘easy task’ to achieve of course and will take a significant change of thinking and action from every individual; but to fail to do so, will be ultimately devastating and have significant negative effects upon sustainable ways of living, Earth’s precious natural resources and will intensify environmental problems (such as waste disposal and energy shortages) for the generations that follow.
References


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