



THE WORLDWATCH INSTITUTE

SPECIAL FOCUS:  
*The Consumer Society*

# STATE OF THE WORLD

2004

Erik Assadourian Christopher Flavin Hilary French Gary Gardner  
Brian Halweil Lisa Mastny Danielle Nierenberg Sandra Postel  
Michael Renner Radhika Sarin Janet Sawin Linda Starke Amy Vickers

**BOX 8-1. THE GAVIOTAS EXPERIENCE: MAKING WELL-BEING A PRIORITY**

Gaviotas is a village of 200 people in rural Colombia with a global reputation for innovative development. Governing their approach is a strong concern for the quality of village life and for the natural environment. For starters, villagers ensure that basic needs are met: residents pay nothing for meals, medical care, education, and housing. All adults have work, whether in the various village enterprises that manufacture solar collectors and windmills, in organic and hydroponic agriculture, or in forestry initiatives.

Social needs are addressed as well, through the rhythm of daily activities. Members work together in village businesses and regularly eat together in the large refectory, even though each home has a kitchen. Music and other cultural events are a regular part of village life. With survival and social needs met in abundance, the atmosphere is peaceful: the community has had no police force, jail, or mayor in its 33-year history. Community norms are set by members and enforced through social pressure.

Gaviotas is known worldwide for its many inventions, including a water pump that village kids work as they ride their seesaw, windmills designed for the gentle breezes of the Colombian plains, a pressurized solar water heater, and a pedal-powered cassava grinder. The

technologies enhance the quality of life of these villagers, but also of other interested communities. As a matter of principle—and in line with their primary interest in advancing quality of life, not just in generating wealth—the villagers do not patent their inventions, which are made widely available. Thousands of the windmills have been installed by Gaviotas technicians across Colombia, and the design has been copied throughout Latin America.

For the villagers, well-being also means treading lightly on the environment. Gaviotas is now self-sufficient in energy, making ample use of solar and wind power and of methane produced from cattle manure. Its air-cooled and solar-heated former hospital (now a water purification center) was named by a Japanese architectural journal as one of the 40 most important buildings in the world. Its agricultural activities are organic. And it is the center of the largest reforestation project in Colombia, having converted tens of thousands of hectares of savannah to forest, from which villagers extract and sell only resin, even though logging would be more lucrative. The villagers believe that a healthy forest generating modest resources is better than a depleted one that yields a temporary bonanza.

SOURCE: See endnote 34.

plement the perspective of GDP. (See also Chapters 1 and 7.) One such effort, the Well-being Index developed by sustainability consultant Robert Prescott-Allen, is noteworthy for its comprehensiveness. (See Box 8-2.)<sup>37</sup>

In addition to recalibrating yardsticks for societal health, governments are using their extensive legislative and regulatory powers to shape the way people consume and the values a society internalizes regarding consumption. Eliminating perverse subsidies and adopting pollution taxes, for example, have already

proved useful in creating a cleaner environment and a higher quality of life in many European countries. (See also Chapter 5.)

And many governments in Europe are helping workers and families to carve out extra time each week. Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and Norway now have 35- to 38-hour workweeks, which in addition to freeing up valuable time for workers often help to create new jobs. The Netherlands has two particularly creative approaches to paring back working hours. Employers