

Solidarity Economy Briefs: CONSUMPTION

The U.S. Solidarity Economy Network stands in solidarity with the Occupy Wall St. movement. As a network of groups, activists and solidarity economy practitioners, we seek to transform our economic system into one that *puts people and planet front and center – an economy for the 99%*. *Another World* is not only possible, it already exists, in many, many forms. The solidarity economy, grounded in principles of solidarity, participatory democracy, sustainability, equity in all dimensions, and pluralism (not a one-size-fits-all model) is a fast growing global movement. We offer these Solidarity Economy briefs to provide a glimpse into some of the aspects of the solidarity economy that exist all around us.

WHAT IS ITS AIM?

Solidarity economy consumption builds the solidarity economy. By participating in its many forms, you can use your power as a consumer to make our economy more equal, fair, sustainable, democratic, cooperative, and community-building. In the traditional capitalist economy, consumption is individualistic and competitive; consumers try to buy goods that will bring them the most utility, at the cheapest price. In the solidarity economy, buyers also seek to have a transformative effect on people and planet.



"Strive for Harmony," mural by Gregory Aliberti, Cleveland Eco-village

HOW DOES IT WORK?

The main kinds of solidarity economy consumption are socially responsible buying, simple living, cooperative consumption, and equalizing consumption.

Socially Responsible Buying

One widespread way to consume solidaristically is by using ones' consumer power to affect positively the way that it is produced. To support workers, consumers buy goods with the union label, which indicates that they were produced by unionized workers. They also boycott goods made through exploitation; for example, consumers forced tomato growers to raise their workers' wages, by boycotting fast food stores which purchased tomatoes from exploitative growers, in a campaign organized by the [Coalition of Imokalee Workers](#). By buying [Fair Trade](#) coffee, chocolate, and crafts, consumers make sure that their consumption is not based on low wage or unsustainable farming methods. By participating in a CSA ([community supported agriculture](#)) or purchasing from [farmers' markets](#), consumers help raise the incomes of local small farmers, as opposed to agribusiness. Finally, in [green consumption](#), consumers target products that are made from recycled materials (paper), have minimum packaging, do less damage to the environment (energy saving appliances, hybrid cars), or last longer; [Green America](#) helped pioneer this movement.

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Reducing Consumption

In our competitive consumerist society, our social status is measured by the amount and quality of the goods and services that we buy; high-rolling consumers are seen as “successes,” while the poor are viewed as “failures.” In stark contrast, people in the solidarity economy strive for a [new “American dream,”](#) with [simple living](#). Due to the negative effects of excess consumption on others, even on themselves, they consume only what they need. High levels of consumption mean high levels of “throughput” – both resource depletion and pollution. Thus, to help avert ecological breakdown and climate disaster, we need to minimize our [ecological footprint](#). Simple living is also good for our physical and mental health, creating space and time to cultivate our inner and spiritual lives and our relationships with others. Further, reducing spending allows us to [downshift](#), i.e. switch to lower paid, but more fulfilling and/or less demanding jobs. Finally, consuming less frees up income, or time, to support one of the many nonprofits working to create an economy for the 99%.

People have found many ways to reduce their levels of consumption. [Sharing](#) cars informally or through systems like [zip-car](#) or [relay rides](#), and common spaces, yards and pools allow people to consume less. [Cooperative houses](#), [eco-villages](#) and [cohousing](#) formalize sharing of living spaces, kitchens, yards, tools, etc., as does the collective consumption of public transportation, roads, pools, libraries, parks, fire and police services, funded through taxes. Reusing and repairing, rather than throwing away and buying new, also reduces consumption. [Freegans](#) live off “the waste stream,” through dumpster-diving or foraging for unharvested foods, often sharing their surplus with the needy; [Food Not Bombs](#) does this in an organized fashion. Selling used goods on [Craig’s List](#) or [e-bay](#) reduces waste and the need to buy new goods; so do informal swapping or “hand-me-downs,” clothing swaps or swap fests, and [freecycling](#).

Consuming Cooperatively

Cooperative consumption both reduces consumption levels and helps build community. People who live together in a [housing cooperative](#) or a [cohousing community](#) reduce consumption through sharing; they also participate in cooperative relationships by collectively organizing their shared spaces and community. Through a [food cooperative](#), people can purchase foodstuffs collectively, for a cheaper price, or actually create a food store that they use, collectively. Parents often come together to form [cooperative day care centers](#); they usually work shifts, and sometimes also hire paid staff.

Equalizing Consumption

There are many ways that the 99% can force the 1% to share their wealth. Needy people are taking unused resources or goods, and taking back those taken from them unfairly. Homeowners and tenants are resisting eviction, with the support of [local Occupy groups](#), [CityLife/Vida Urbana](#), and others. The homeless are squatting in empty houses or occupying public spaces. At Republic Windows and Doors, workers refused to leave their factory when the owners tried to close it, like thousands in Argentina in the [recuperated factory movement](#). Hungry people in urban food deserts are occupying and transforming empty lots into [community gardens](#), like thousands in Brazil’s [MST](#) (landless workers movement) who have set up cooperative villages and organic farms on occupied lands. Politically, we can equalize consumption by creating [economic human rights](#) (rights to healthcare, education, a job, and housing), and by supporting progressive income taxes, the earned income tax credit, and taxes on [wealth](#), [inheritance](#), and luxuries.

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