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## Why the American Dream Doesn't Work in Developing Countries

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**The United States** was founded on the idea of individual liberty, individual ownership, and individual needs. Unfortunately, this is a costly way for a country to develop, especially if every citizen aspires to express his freedom and individuality by owning a car or a house or a hammer.

Nearly 250 years into the evolution of our ethos of individuality, some Americans are starting to recognize that the primacy of individual ownership is not always economically sustainable. A movement has begun that places value on providing access to products and services, rather than ownership. Do we all really need to own a car? Or can we share a ZipCar that can be rented by the hour and used as needed? Consider the space we use. Do we all need to live in a house? Or can we seek out co-housing situations, where families share communal spaces like kitchens and yards, but have private sleeping quarters. Consider items that are used by all, but infrequently: Could the residents of each floor of an apartment building share tools like hammers and brooms instead of buying their own?

The move toward access, rather than ownership is documented and promoted in three recently released books, *The Age of Access*, *The Mesh*, and *What's Mine Is Yours*. (See GOOD's infographic on this.) This trend has applications far beyond liberal American households and communities.

The concept of communal living and shared resources has long been a feature of Eastern society. Households are characterized by their joint family nature. Food is shared, and often served from one bowl. In poorer areas, multiple families share water taps, groups of women access microfinance together, strangers share taxis and rickshaws. However, the collective nature of Eastern society is less a political statement than an imperative to stretch sparse resources.

As the East develops, and the size of the middle class grows, there is a push toward individual ownership. With increased incomes, the incidence of joint families reduces, and sharing resources is less of a financial necessity. However, if the East starts to choose individual ownership more readily over communal access, emerging economies will likely struggle to manage these patterns of consumption, particularly with regard to pollution and waste.

From an economic development perspective, Western practitioners are guilty of seeking solutions for the poor that are based on these American values. It's only natural; this ideal is integral to the West's notion of progress. Solutions to a lack of access to clean water, sanitation, healthcare, and education often cater to the provision of individual ownership: a faucet in every kitchen, a toilet in every home. However, this paradigm is wasteful, and thus, may not be ideal or sustainable for developing world countries.



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