

## Chapter 13

### Sustainable Consumption: An Important but Ambiguous Concept

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#### Abstract

This chapter explores the origins of the concept in global policy circles in the 1990s; and its subsequent evolution in academia, business, civil society, and policy. It elaborates in some detail how academic research increasingly critiqued the understanding of consumption as an individual act, and instead conceptualized it as a systemic issue deeply embedded in the economy, the culture, and the infrastructures, and structured by life-event decisions like buying a house. It describes how the ecologically inspired critique of consumption merged with the much older social critique of consumerism going back to Karl Marx, Thorstein Veblen, and the Frankfurter Schule. It discusses the emergence of alternatives and possible ways of systemic change. It describes how the concept has influenced policies in the European Union, on the level of cities, and organizations like the World Business Council on Sustainable Development. Since the Great Recession of 2008 sustainable consumption acquired new meanings spurred by the economic crisis and, in the US, the demise of the “American Dream”. Finally, this chapter discusses the ambiguities of the concept and its possible futures.

#### Introduction

Sustainable consumption is an emerging normative concept presently gaining traction in policy circles. It mainly refers to the environmental problems related to material consumption patterns in affluent societies, but also applies to inequities in consumption patterns between rich and poor. It is discussed in emerging economies that are often on a pathway toward affluent consumption patterns. It is a concept that recognizes consumption is part of a complex system and that a shift toward sustainable consumption patterns requires systemic changes in the economy, technology, governance, culture, life styles, values, and institutions. It marks a shift in focus from the supply side (sustainable production) to the demand side.

The origins of sustainable consumption go back to the UN “Earth Summit” of 1992, where “*unsustainable patterns of production and consumption*” were identified as a main cause of environmental deterioration. It was taken up subsequently by academic research, which until

then had criticized consumerism from a social rather than an environmental perspective.

Sustainable consumption is closely related to sustainable production; the difference is that while sustainable production refers to sustainable technological innovations, sustainable consumption is more focused on behavior, life styles, and well-being.

A wide range of academic disciplines is researching possibilities for transitions to sustainable consumption patterns and systems, ranging from economics (ecological, steady state and degrowth) to happiness and well-being research. The concept has gained traction in European Union and municipal policy circles in Europe, in parts of the US and elsewhere. It is presently associated with localism and the sharing economy, but there is also a strong tendency to analyze the issue at the macro-level.

However, the concept suffers from tensions and ambiguities. These are related to scale (from individual to institutional and macro); equity (overconsumption in affluent societies vs. under consumption in poor communities); technology (technology optimism vs. sufficiency and consuming differently); and between weak and strong versions. The last contrast refers to the belief in business and government circles that sustainable consumption can be reached without deep changes in institutions versus those who criticize the economic growth paradigm and the economic capitalist system itself. Finally, there are tensions among those who see the issue as mainly an economic one (steady state and degrowth), those who consider it essentially as a cultural problem, and those who view it as both.

This chapter will first explore the origins of the concept in UN policy circles and analyze the conceptual developments in academic research and how it merged with earlier research traditions criticizing consumer society. It will then explore the present significance of the concept in policy circles, mainly focusing on the UN, business, and regional and local policy

making. Next it explores ambiguities and tensions inherent in the concept and the ways these are addressed in research and practice. Finally, it will explore the possible future development and significance of the concept.

### **Origins in UN Policy Circles and Definition of the Concept**

The concept sustainable consumption first emerged in the political discourse after the UNCED conference or Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. In Agenda 21 it was stated that “...[t]he major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries, which is a matter of grave concern, aggravating poverty and imbalances” (United Nations 1992).

Agenda 21 (1992) contained a chapter (4) on “Changing Consumption Habits,” which focuses on addressing unsustainable patterns of production and consumption; it contends that action is needed to meet the following broad objectives: “to promote patterns of consumption and production that reduce environmental stress and will meet the basic needs of humanity; to develop a better understanding of the role of consumption and how to bring about more sustainable consumption patterns.” It developed an action agenda for management, research, policies, and strategies (United Nations 1992, chapter 4).

It is interesting that in this document the term sustainable consumption is not yet used. It subsequently appeared in the academic discourse. A first and widely quoted definition is from the Oslo Symposium of 1994: “...the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations” (IISD 1995). To quote further:

Sustainable consumption is an umbrella term that brings together a number of key issues, such as meeting needs, enhancing the quality of life, improving resource efficiency, increasing the use of renewable energy sources, minimizing waste, taking a life cycle perspective and taking into account the equity dimension (IISD 1995).

More recently Spangenberg (2014) proposed a new and more encompassing definition, based on “an overall restructuring of the social, economic, and institutional fabric of societies and institutions, of production, allocation, and consumption patterns.” Sustainable consumption is “the ability to lead a dignified life, maintaining or enhancing quality of life despite shrinking resource availability.”

However, in the first 10 years after Rio action was limited, except for the already mentioned Oslo Symposium of 1994 (IISD 1995). The OECD (1997) wrote a major report on Sustainable Consumption; and the UNDP in 1998 mentioned it in its Human Development Report. In 2002 ICSPAC, the International Coalition for Sustainable Production and Consumption, a global coalition of NGOs, wrote a progress report for the World Summit in Johannesburg (ICSPAC 2002). The title of this report, *Waiting for Delivery*, summarizes the main conclusion: although there was a lot of talking, little progress has been made towards implementation; and the world is fast moving in the wrong direction of unsustainable development. In 2002 at the WSSD, governments formally agreed that “.....poverty eradication and changing unsustainable patterns of production and consumption are “overarching objectives of sustainable development and an essential requirement for promoting environmental protection” (United Nations 2002).

In 2003 the UN launched the Marrakech process with the aim of bringing together the expertise and leadership needed to develop a *Ten Year Framework of Programs* (10YFP). The

Marrakech Process mainly consisted of a series of Task Forces led by individual countries. These were: Sustainable Lifestyles (focusing on sustainable consumption patterns related to lifestyles and culture); Sustainable Products (to raise awareness on product policy and eco-design); Cooperation with Africa; and Sustainable Public Procurement (to promote understanding of the issue, exchange experience, identify best practices, and develop links between governments, NGOs and other actors). These were later followed by additional task forces on: Education for Sustainable Consumption; Sustainable Buildings and Construction; and Sustainable Tourism. (UNEP 2014a). The Marrakech process has not been evaluated by independent research. The general opinion is that the results have been mixed at best. The individual Task Forces have resulted in important outcomes, but the dissemination of results has so far hardly been translated into concrete policies. The most visible outcome is the creation, at the Rio summit in 2012, of the Ten Year Framework of Programs on Sustainable Consumption and Production (UNEP 2014b). It took ten years to establish this program.

### **Evolution of the Concept**

As mentioned before, the Oslo Symposium of 1994 provided the first academic definition of sustainable consumption. Research projects related to sustainable consumption emerged in that period, but were not yet labeled as such. For instance, the EU-funded project “Strategies for the Sustainable Household” (1998-2000) developed methodologies for future visions for sustainable consumption practices and methods of backcasting how to get there (Green et al. 2002), but did not use the term sustainable consumption. The term first emerged in a report on sustainable consumption and globalization (Fuchs et al. 2000). Subsequently Maurie Cohen and Joe Murphy (2001) use the term in the title of their book “Exploring Sustainable Consumption.” In chapter 6

of this book Goodman and Goodman make a distinction between a reorientation towards more environmentally friendly production technologies and consumption patterns versus alternatives to the capitalist economy. These two positions are consonant with what has later been called “weak” and “strong” sustainable consumption (Lorek et al. 2011).

Scholars recognized in that period that unsustainable consumption practices cannot be changed by addressing individual consumers, attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles alone. Consumers are often locked-in by decisions made earlier in life, such as living in the suburbs and thus become dependent on multiple cars per family, or buying a large house that requires heating, cooling, and “stuff” (Sanne 2002). Consumers are “socially embedded” meaning that individual choices are heavily influenced by contextual social forces like advertisements and social media, and structural features like convenience. Consumers are also “distanced” meaning that they have no direct access or knowledge about the production processes of consumables which pollute the environment (Princen et al. 2002). Social practice theory emerged, arguing that instead of taking the consumer as the starting point, social practices like clothing, housing, food provision, travel, sport, and leisure should be taken as objects for analysis (Spaargaren 2003; Shove 2003).

More recently, the approach to influencing individual consumer behavior has seen a revival, stimulated by the emergence of the “nudging” concept (Thaler et al. 2008; Sunstein 2014). This idea suggests that “choice architecture” may guide and enable consumers to make choices automatically. Nudges do not try to change value systems or provide additional information; instead they focus on enabling behaviors and private decisions. A prime example is to place green products on prominent places in the supermarket.

In economics the neo-classical tradition has been challenged by, among others, ecological and steady-state economics (Daly 1990) and more recently by “New Economics” and the solidarity economy. In neoclassical economics, emphasis has been mostly on production. Consumption is treated as a “utility function” which is revealed by people's willingness to pay a certain price for goods. Ecological economics recognizes that the economy is a subsystem of a larger ecological system, and that there are thus boundaries to material growth. A steady state economy is loosely defined as “... a truly green economy. It aims for stable population and stable consumption of energy and materials at sustainable levels.” (CASSE 2015). Parallel with this discussion is the critique of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) as an indicator for (economic) well-being. Since WWII politicians have adopted GDP not only as an indicator for the state of the economy, but also for well-being in general. This notion has been criticized by many and has resulted in a quest for alternative indicators of well-being. The most influential attempt has been in a report by Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi (2009).

Sustainable consumption research often addresses “systems of provision” like food, housing, or transportation. In the EU-funded SCORE! (Sustainable Consumption Research Exchanges!) project these systems have been analyzed from the perspectives of business studies, design, consumer research, and system innovations and published in five influential books (Tukker, Emmert et al. 2008; Tukker, Charter et al. 2008; Geerken et al. 2009; Tischner et al. 2010; Lahlou 2011). A more sophisticated conceptual approach is developed in the “Transition Management” research tradition, also known as the “Multi-Level Perspective” (Geels and Schot 2007). In this research tradition the above systems of provision can be viewed as “socio-technical regimes” which are stable complex systems. In this approach, bottom-up initiatives in technology and social practices may constitute “niches” in which experimentation into

alternatives to the dominant regime takes place. The bottom-up pressures provided by niche experiments, in combination with the top-down pressures from the highest “landscape” level, may destabilize the socio-technical regime, which then could be modified or even replaced by a different regime. A historic illustration is the replacement of coal by oil and then natural gas for heating homes. A more contemporary example would be the possible replacement of the fossil fuel-based energy regime by a low-carbon regime based on renewables. Consumption practices are very much part of the dominant regimes, and alternative consumption practices in niches may help to challenge a dominant regime.

What happens in niches is that producers and consumers jointly develop new technologies, products, services, and practices that are more sustainable from environmental and social perspectives. Creativity, stakeholder participation, and learning are essential in such processes. Brown and Vergragt have coined the term “Bounded Socio-Technical Experiment (BSTE) and emphasized the collective higher order learning processes that take place in, for instance, the design of a high performance, energy-neutral building (Brown et al. 2008). Similarly, Seyfang and Smith coined the term “grassroots innovations” to depict similar localized multi-stakeholder processes to collectively develop sustainable solutions and thus change consumption patterns (Seyfang et al. 2007; Seyfang 2009).

These conceptual approaches were used in a SCORAI (Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative) workshop in Princeton New Jersey in 2011 in which the research traditions of socio-technical transitions (Geels and Schot 2007), social practice theories (Shove 2003; Spaargaren 2013) and new economics (Harris 2013; Røpke 2013) were brought together. This workshop, which resulted in the book “Innovations in Sustainable Consumption”,



constructed bridges between the macro-level analysis of new economics and the micro-level analyses of social practices, and it resulted in an emerging theory of change (Cohen et al. 2013).

Unsustainable consumption patterns are driven by economic factors, policy, technological innovation, infrastructure, business forces, marketing and advertisements, personal needs, social values and norms (Mont et al. 2009). More recently the concept of “power” has entered the discourse around sustainable consumption. Fuchs et al. (2013a, 2013b) conceptualize three forms of power: *instrumental power*, e.g., lobbying or campaign finance; *structural material power* that predetermines decision and non-decision making through the shaping of actors’ behavioral options; and *structural ideational power* which reveals how policy problems, actors, interests, and solutions are constituted and defined before decision making commences.

Many authors have written about alternatives to unsustainable consumption practices and how to achieve change. In the 1990s Duane Elgin (1993) developed the concept of “voluntary simplicity,” which includes the principles of frugal consumption, ecological awareness, and personal growth. In its newer edition it also includes the more recent trend towards “downshifting”. Its origins go back to the work of E. F. Schumacher (*Small is Beautiful*) and Mahatma Gandhi. It contrasts the worldviews of the industrial era and the ecological era. Tom Princen coined the term “sufficiency” as a challenge to the dominance of “efficiency” in modern society. While he acknowledges that we also need efficiency, he argues that more is not always better, and that in an environmentally constrained world it may be more ethical to consume less and be content with sufficiency instead of striving to consume as much as possible and then limit the negative side effects of this consumption by technological efficiency measures (Princen 2005). This argument clearly reflects the normative connotation of sustainable consumption.

*Critique of Consumerism*

Scholars and historians of the modern consumer society commonly date its advent from the first two decades of the twentieth century (reviewed by Brown et al. 2016). The provident remark made in 1929 by Charles Kettering, director of research at General Motors, has been widely quoted by various authors: “the key to economic prosperity is the organized creation of dissatisfaction....If everybody was satisfied, nobody would want to buy anything” (Kettering 1929). Criticism of consumer society goes back to the mid-19th century when Karl Marx developed the concept “commodity fetishism” which means that the social relations of labor are obscured by consumer goods that carry other kinds of symbolic value for their users (Marx 1872). He did not yet use the word “consumption”, because in the 19th century this famously meant “a progressive wasting away of the body, especially from pulmonary tuberculosis.” The modern concept of consumption first appeared late 19th century in the writings of Thorstein Veblen (1899), who criticized “conspicuous consumption” by the rich, meaning ostentatiously displaying wealth while ignoring the poverty of the rest of the population. Émile Durkheim and Max Weber (1905) pointed at the centrality of consumer goods when writing about the growing importance of them to social life in the late 19th century.

Much of the criticism of consumerism has focused on its manipulation of human desires. Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1944) essay on “The Culture Industry” contends that consumption of the easy pleasures of popular culture, made available by the mass communications media, renders people docile and content, no matter how difficult their economic circumstances. The inherent danger of the culture industry is the cultivation of false psychological needs that can only be met and satisfied by the products of capitalism. In contrast, authentic psychological needs relate to freedom, creativity, and genuine happiness. The American sociologist David Riesman’s landmark book, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), set the foundation for how sociologists

study how people seek validation and community through material consumption, by looking to and molding themselves in the image of those immediately around them.

The use of consumer motivational research and other psychological techniques by advertisers to manipulate expectations and to induce desire for products was described by Vance Packard in his famous book, *The Hidden Persuaders* (Packard 1955). John Kenneth Galbraith (1958) criticized neoclassical economics and the emphasis on “utility” rather than needs; he contends that “... If the individual’s wants are to be urgent, they must be original with himself. They cannot be urgent if they must be contrived for him. And above all, they must not be contrived by the process of production by which they are satisfied. For this means that the whole case for the urgency of production, based on the urgency of wants, falls to the ground.”

In the 1960s the counter culture movement criticized consumerism and was inspired by the famous book *One-dimensional Man* by Herbert Marcuse (1964), who describes western societies as awash in consumer solutions that are meant to solve one’s problems, and thus provide market answers for what are actually political, cultural, and social problems. More modern critiques such as that of Skidelsky et al. (2012) place much of the responsibility for the current insatiable pursuit of material goods and money on neoclassical economic science. By replacing the concept of value with utility, and avarice and greed with self-interest, economics eliminated the controls--long recognized in religious and moral teachings--on the human tendency for excess. These ideas also inspired David Graeber (2013), who argues that the real objective of neoclassical economics was not free market capitalism, but rather the suppression of dissent and creativity, which would henceforth be channeled into consumerism.

Since the 1970s, many sociologists have embraced French social theorist Jean Baudrillard’s (1970) ideas about the symbolic currency of consumer goods, and take seriously

his claim that seeing consumption as a universal element of the human condition obscures the class politics in which it rests. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) research and theorizing of the differentiation between consumer goods, and how these both reflect and reproduce cultural, class, and educational differences and hierarchies, is a cornerstone of today's sociology of consumption (Allen et al. 1994).

Building on these early criticisms of consumer society, and supported by empirical data, Juliet Schor, in *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need* (1998) criticizes the cycle of work-and-spend, and asks why so many Americans are trapped in a cycle of working longer hours in order to spend more money on things that they do not need and which do not make them happy. She calls this the "upward creep of desire" and develops nine principles of how to address it. She moves beyond the individualistic approach towards the need for "coordinated intervention" through strong government policies, including taxation.

### *Recent Developments*

Societal developments since 2008 have considerably changed the context for the evolution of the sustainable consumption concept. The Great Recession of 2008 and subsequent years eroded general confidence in progress and increased consumption and has squeezed the middle class and its expectation of ever-increasing purchasing power. In the US, massive unemployment, foreclosures of homes, and evaporation of retirement funds have eroded the "American Dream" and the expectation that the children of the middle class will enjoy greater prosperity than their parents. The Occupy Wall Street movement has put inequity of the 1% rich and the remaining 99% squarely on the societal and political agenda (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Vergragt 2013; Graeber 2013; Piketty 2013). The emergence of the Degrowth movement, first in Southern Europe, and more recently also in North America, has challenged the economic growth paradigm

and existing notions of wellbeing through material consumption (Schneider et al, 2010, 2011; Sekulova et al 2013).

Lorek and Fuchs (2013) make an explicit connection between “strong sustainable consumption” and degrowth. The notion of the solidarity economy (Miller 2012) is based on increasing the quality of life through not-for-profit endeavors and is critical of exploitation under capitalist economics and the corporate, shareholder-dominated economy. It has placed economic democracy and alternative forms of business ownership on the political agenda (Kelly 2012). Environmentalists have challenged the narrow focus of the environmental movement (Speth 2012) and argued for broadening it with social and cultural issues. More recently, the New Economy movement has formulated novel principles that are consonant with sustainable consumption (Goodwin et al. 2012). The peer-to-peer or sharing economy calls for sustainable consumption practices like sharing. Grassroots innovations (Seyfang et al. 2007, 2009) and Transition Towns movements (Hopkins 2008) are reframing consumers as producers (for locally produced food, renewable energy, repair services) and thus as “prosumers” (Ritzer et al. 2010).

Another conceptual development is the re-emergence of needs theory in research. Manfred Max-Neef (1991) developed a needs theory in which he made a distinction between basic needs, which are universal, and satisfiers, which are highly contextual and locally different. This theory was expanded by Tim Jackson et al. (2006) who argues, following Beaudrillard (1970), that products not only satisfy needs but also have important symbolic meaning, signifying status, personal identity, and belonging. Thus consumption has an important cultural meaning. Sustainable consumption discourse has incorporated the concepts of a good life, well-being, and happiness as a path toward societal flourishing. What is remarkable is the consistency and stability of certain basic determinants of happiness across very different countries and

cultures: a stable marriage, good health, community and friendships, social trust and autonomy. Another consistent observation is that people judge the emotional value of their *material* wealth in comparison to others. Once basic subsistence needs are met, it is of greater importance to have more than others than more in an absolute sense. A distinction is made between the Benthamite perspective where wellbeing is understood as an emotional state of pleasure/ contentment/ joy, and the Aristotelian perspective that focuses on satisfaction arising from evaluating one's life and emphasizes autonomy, search for meaning, spirituality, commitment and ethical behavior, and gaining respect, status, and a sense of achievement (Max-Neef 1991; Nussbaum 2011; reviewed in, for example, Jackson 2009; Di Giulio et al. 2012; Jackson and Victor 2013).

Thus a number of new societal developments frame the issues around sustainable consumption in a rather different way. Many of them do not explicitly invoke the notion of sustainability, but rather define framings around solidarity, community, equity, wellbeing, democracy, and self-reliance. Two aspects are particularly important in these new social movements: localism, and community. Both seem to be a reaction to globalization and to what Marxists used to call alienation due to globalization, distancing, and the pervasive influence of technologies in modern society. On the other hand, the internet and especially social media play a critical role in the emergence of the new economy and especially the peer-to-peer and sharing economy. The emerging threat of climate change is also important, mostly reinforcing local adaptation rather than global mitigation.

Cohen (2013) has analyzed the emerging signs of a possible post-consumerist culture, with Millennials moving back into the cities, renouncing their car and refusing to obtain drivers licenses while living in smaller spaces. Brown et al. (2015) have hypothesized that change may

come from a redefinition of wellbeing among the millennial generation, spurred by the internet and social media as well as by economic constraints.

In summary, sustainable consumption is rooted in both 19<sup>th</sup> century criticisms of the consumer society and in 21<sup>st</sup> century understandings of environmental issues related to consumption patterns and re-evaluations of what constitutes the good life. An understanding is emerging of what ultimately drives (over)consumption, but it still begs the question articulated by Bill Rees: is it part of the human condition that we will always consume as much as we can (Rees 2010)? Would it be possible to achieve a healthy economy without excessive material consumption? Are the problems of unsustainable consumption inherent in the system of capitalist economy and adherence to an inherently unsustainable growth ideology; or can they be solved within the present capitalist system?

### **Significance of the Concept in Policy and Business Circles**

The EU was among the first jurisdictions to develop policies on sustainable consumption. In the early years these policies were mainly aimed at cleaner production and green products in the so-called Integrated Product Policy (IPP) (European Commission 2001). Subsequently, EU policies moved towards sustainable production and consumption in a policy document called the Sustainable Production and Consumption Industrial Policy Action Plan (European Commission 2008). More recently the “Roadmap to a Resource Efficient Europe” outlines how Europe's economy can be transformed into a sustainable one by 2050. It proposes ways to increase resource productivity and decouple economic growth from resource use and its environmental impacts (European Commission 2011). In June 2013 the European Parliament and the Council agreed on the 7<sup>th</sup> EU Environment Action Programme to 2020, entitled Living Well, Within the

Limits of Our Planet (European Commission 2012). One of the plan's priority objectives is "To turn the EU into a resource-efficient, green and competitive low-carbon economy," which requires that "the overall environmental impact of production and consumption is reduced, in particular in the food, housing and mobility sectors." Recently the EU funded the SPREAD project, which envisioned sustainable lifestyles and strategies to attain them. (SPREAD 2013; Mont et al. 2014). Yet the EU seems to be moving away from the concept of sustainable consumption and adopting new language such as the "circular economy" (Mortensen 2015, pers. comm.) and "social innovation" which appear to be less threatening to existing interests.

The US does not have a formal policy on sustainable consumption. There is even a reluctance to use this concept in policy circles at the federal level. The US and Canadian governments organized two workshops on Sustainable Production and Consumption in the context of the Marrakech process in 2008 in Washington DC, and in 2011 in Ottawa. These workshops were well attended by policy makers, business and civil society representatives, and academics (UNEP 2008; 2011). Sustainable consumption is somewhat better established at the level of some states in the US and provinces in Canada, mainly on the west coast.

In 2010 the North American Roundtable on Sustainable Production and Consumption (NARSPAC) was formed as a multi-stakeholder platform (NARSPAC 2014). Since its start, it has attracted many participants from business and government, in addition to early civil society and academic participation. It brings the dialogue on the concept to federal policy makers.

In many regions of the world, cities have taken the lead in the quest for a transformation towards "ecocities" or "sustainable cities" (ICLEI 2015). It is interesting that on the US West Coast (Oregon and California), but also in other places, sustainable consumption has become a framework for municipal policies. Many cities are working to make their local economies more



resilient and sustainable while building new forms of prosperity. Sustainable consumption and production provides a meaningful framework to advance this work as well as promote a broader societal shift. In comparison to suburbs and rural areas, urban centers in North America have higher population densities, smaller houses, lower levels of automobile use, more concentration of diverse activities, and the political capacity to implement innovative experiments with respect to personal mobility, public spaces, land use, and resource flows. This gives local governments the unique potential to shape opportunities for sustainable lifestyles and the local economies to support them.

For many cities, interest in sustainable consumption and production emerged from local climate action planning, but there are other dimensions that deserve exploration and analysis:

- **Structure of local economies:** sustainable consumption provides local businesses with new models and opportunities in a way that complements broader economic development strategies. Research suggests new ways for local businesses to meet these needs through a focus on providing service rather than products.
- **Social equity considerations:** enhancing the range of affordable alternatives provides families of all income levels with ways to save money and meet their needs, freeing up time and resources for the things that really matter: time with family and friends, access to nature and recreation, community volunteerism, building memories, and acquiring new skills.
- **Social capital and cohesion:** as cities build toward more compact, cohesive and livable communities, this urban form aligns with the collaborative nature of sustainable consumption. People living in close proximity have more opportunities to share idle resources like cars, sports equipment or yard tools. Compact, cohesive communities also provide a platform for launching

small-scale commercial ventures for sharing skills like equipment repair, clothing alternations and hair styling.

SCORAI (the research network Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative) together with the Urban Sustainable Directors Network (USDN) organized a workshop in October 2014 to explore these questions further (USDN 2015). This workshop resulted in the “Eugene Memo”, a mobilizing document that describes the relevance of sustainable consumption for city policy makers (Eugene, USDN, and SCORAI 2015).

### *Business*

At the global level, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) has been an important player with respect to sustainable development. Since the 1990s the WBCSD has published influential reports representing a progressive business vision on sustainable development issues. These reports represent the interests of mostly large companies, but also try to influence the business community with long-term visions of the role of business in a sustainable society.

In 2008 the WBCSD published “Sustainable Consumption: Facts and Trends from a Business Perspective” (WBCSD 2008). In this report the WBCSD acknowledges the impacts of global consumption on the Earth’s ecosystems and that human well-being does not necessarily rely on high levels of consumption. It notes that consumers are increasingly concerned about environmental and social issues, although this often does not translate into behavioral change. The role of business is then described along three dimensions: innovation to create sustainable products and services; choice-influencing through marketing; and choice-editing by removing unsustainable products from the market place. They call for dialogue with other stakeholders and among business to define sustainable products and lifestyles and formulate actionable responses.

Consumers have become more sensitive to the reputation of companies; which has created pressure on companies to improve their record on ecological and social issues. The WBCSD acknowledges that consumer lifestyles should change and business needs to play a leadership role in fostering more sustainable consumer choices for more sustainable life styles.

In 2010 the WBCSD published “Vision 2050, A New Agenda for Business,” which presents a vision and a pathway based on backcasting methodology (WBCSD 2010; Vergragt and Quist 2011). Building on this, the WBCSD published a subsequent report, “A Vision for Sustainable Consumption: Innovation, Collaboration, and the Management of Choice” (WBCSD undated; around 2012). This vision is made up of five key elements: better products and services; enlightened consumers with more awareness and motivations to avoid negative impacts; maximized total value, which means both classic utility and environmental and social benefits; new indicators for success (meaning a suite of indicators beyond GDP); and a cohesive and responsive market place, which means a constant dialogue and information exchange among all actors in the value chain. The WBCSD acknowledges that to realize this vision, there will have to be increased collaboration and information exchange between stakeholders; deeper understanding of consumer behaviors; more use of technology for information sharing; an evolution in business models; and efforts to reinforce trust between social actors.

These reports by the WBCSD reflect the process through which they were developed, which was in close collaboration with the research community and civil society. They present a daring vision, at least from a business perspective. Notably absent in these reports is an appreciation of the role of government regulation and policies. They imply that business, in collaboration with civil society, will be able to implement the vision and pathways developed in these reports. They suggest that government regulation and policies are not only unnecessary but

possibly counter-productive. Implicitly, this reinforces the neoclassical ideology of free markets. WBCSD does not question this free market ideology or the paradox of perpetual growth in a finite world. Notably, none of the initiatives undertaken by the global business associations questions economic growth or mass consumption; thus they are at best consistent with weak sustainable consumption. It is unclear how much influence these reports have on business behavior.

In a recent paper Bocken et al. (2014) developed a typology of sustainable business models. One of their archetypes is called “encouraging sufficiency.” One of its aspects is addressing a broader range of stakeholders. This archetype challenges advertising and overconsumption. Kelly (2013) has recently described a “generative economy” where different business ownership models are prevalent.

### **Recent Developments on the Global UN Level**

Two recent developments are important. The first, established at the Rio+20 conference in 2012, is the Ten Year Framework of Programs on Sustainable Production and Consumption (10YFP). This initiative is underway and so far has established five programs: consumer information; sustainable lifestyles and education; sustainable public procurement; sustainable buildings and construction; and sustainable tourism, including ecotourism (UNEP 2014b).

The other important development is the establishment by the UN in 2015 of Sustainable Development Goals. Goal 12 is to “Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns” (UN 2015). Under this goal, 12 targets have been formulated, of which the first is “Implement the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on sustainable consumption and production (10YFP).” Others goals include sustainable management, efficient resource use, halving per capita global food waste; sound management of chemicals and reduction of waste; sustainable reporting;

sustainable public procurement; information provision and awareness raising; supporting developing countries in their scientific and technological capacities; sustainable tourism; and reforming taxes and subsidies. The implementation and financing of strategies and policies achieve these goals are unclear; now these goals are formally accepted the concept of sustainable consumption will remain anchored in the global political agenda of sustainable development.

### **Ambiguities, Tensions and Possible Future Developments**

The wider adoption of the concept of sustainable consumption has been hampered by its internal contradictions and ambiguities and its wide scope. The first ambiguity is captured by the weak versus strong sustainable consumption metaphor. The strong version, mainly endorsed by academics and activists, criticizes consumerist culture and the present economic system while arguing that systemic change is necessary. This version also argues that well-being above a certain minimum level is not dependent on material consumption and that economic indicators should go “beyond GDP.” In contrast, many mainstream actors strive to reform government policies on all levels to incorporate elements of sustainable consumption or try to encourage business to take on the task: this often results in weak forms of sustainable consumption.

A second ambiguity is that in many cases the consumer is addressed as an individual through efforts to seek to influence behavior through information, incentives, and nudging. This approach largely disregards how individuals are embedded in a social and physical infrastructure that makes individual changes difficult or impossible. Adding to this challenge, consumers are known to seek status, identity and recognition through consumption of material goods, and this

complicates individual actions towards sustainable consumption. All of this is reinforced by the advertising industry, which addresses consumers as individuals and is firmly established in consumer society.

A third problem with the concept is that many communities and countries are consuming below a sufficiency level and strive to enhance their well-being through increased material consumption. This makes it harder to communicate the concept to a wide audience, especially because of widespread poverty in affluent societies. It is hard to communicate sustainable consumption when many people cannot make ends meet. The conceptual challenge is finding a way to enhance well-being without “overshoot,” so that individuals and communities reaching a sustainable minimum level of consumption do not seek to consume beyond that. This has so far proven very challenging; consider for instance the emergent consumerist middle class in China.

A fourth problem is that communicating a message of “reduction” does not work well; so various different framings have been tried, like “consuming differently,” “sufficiency,” “well-being” and many others. Still the drive to buy material goods seems to be deeply engrained in people’s consciousness; and the alternatives are difficult to communicate beyond a small elite of sustainability advocates. Even in affluent communities many people feel they need to work more, earn more, and spend more to feel satisfaction.

Finally, there is the issue of how to quantify and measure consumption levels and establish an operationalization of sustainable consumption. Because the concept is so all-encompassing, to include equity issues as well as criticism of economic growth and lifestyles, establishing a norm of what constitutes “sustainable” is virtually impossible. Concepts like carbon and ecological footprints and tons of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction only capture aspects of sustainable consumption while neglecting equity and cultural and lifestyle aspects.

These ambiguities and tensions have spurred researchers, activists, and policy makers to create more appealing concepts than sustainable consumption, such as resource efficiency, the green economy, green growth, and the circular economy. However, many of these concepts do not obviously relate to individual consumption and thus lose one of the strong aspects of sustainable consumption, which refers to both individual *and* collective consumption.

So in the future two developments seem to be possible. The first is that the concept sustainable consumption will disappear because it will succumb to its internal contradictions and ambiguities and be replaced by more socially and politically acceptable alternatives mentioned above. The other possibility is that the concept survives and gains more strength in the policy domain. This could mirror a development similar to that of the concept sustainable development itself, which was also considered ambiguous and ill-defined and was declared dead many times before it surged in popularity and influence in recent years.

If sustainable consumption survives as a concept, will it encourage more effective policies and actions for the creation of more sustainable consumption patterns? The barriers are formidable: entrenched interests and power relationships; the dominant culture of consumerism and consumer sovereignty; the advertisement industry; the economic growth paradigm and the prevalence of GDP as an indicator of well-being; the distancing of environmental pollution from its sources; the lack of awareness by consumers; and lock-in into unsustainable life situations ... the list can go on and on. Vigorous government policies appear to be necessary but would be only possible if backed-up by a strong social movement. And such a social movement is probably only possible if triggered by major disasters (such as severe climate change) or by a fundamental cultural transformation. Such cultural transformations have happened before: the broad acceptance of civil rights following the civil rights movement; the end of smoking

nicotine; the broad acceptance of gay marriage, and others. So they are not impossible. Also needed are leaders with a strong and appealing vision and a public that is ready to make deep changes in lifestyles because it recognizes the limits of the present system of overconsumption.



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