

# STRONG SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND DEGROWTH

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## Abstract

Based on the analysis how the political and scientific discourses on Sustainable Consumption developed during the last two decades the paper develops the concept of Strong Sustainable Consumption Governance. Next to an emphasis that Sustainable Consumption has to consider resource consumption (including the available sink capacity of the ecosystem) it highlights their use and distribution among the Earth's population, and considers their contribution to human well-being. For the lifestyles of the global consumer class this implies giving specific attention to the levels and patterns of consumption. The paper questions the actual political SCP debate, its strong reliance on Sustainable Consumer Procurement, and the belief that green economic growth can cure all our problems. Instead it suggests other ways to go. To stimulate public debate it seems useful to apply a carrot and stick strategy. The stick in this case is to create a sense of urgency for the global environmental and social threads. The carrot would be to articulate better the message to the public and policy that a de-growing economy is not as much of a disaster as mainstream economics tends to suggest. In this context governments should overcome the dominant strategy of information provision but take responsibility for governance and accepting that hard policies like regulatory instruments and economic instruments are most effective. Civil Society Organizations should switch from promoting Sustainable (in fact green) Consumption by using marketing strategies and instead foster public debate about values and well-being.

Keywords: *sustainable consumption, degrowth, policy instruments, NGOs*

## 1. Introduction

With the increasing rise in the standard of living most of the technical solutions for reducing pollution, and even more so for reducing material or energy consumption, turn out to be insufficient as their effects are cancelled out by economic growth processes. This is where

the necessity of opening up the perspective from production and products towards Sustainable Consumption emerges.

During my studies, I have become increasingly aware of the fact that Sustainable Consumption is pursued via two kinds of pathways. One is to choose products and services that are either less resource consuming, or less burdening for the environment, or less destructive for people actually producing them (fair trade aspects). This, I argue, is a Weak Sustainable Consumption approach. A second pathway is to reduce the level of consumption (Fuchs and Lorek 2005). While the former pathway has already proved to be a tricky challenge in practice and has been dealt with in thousands of research studies, campaigns and conferences all over the world, it is the latter one that seems necessary if serious problems for the Earth and its inhabitants are to be avoided (Heinberg 2003; Hirsch 2005; Jackson 2009). To highlight this pathway's importance I call it "Strong Sustainable Consumption".

One of the early conferences on Sustainable Consumption, the so called Oslo Symposium held in 1994, defines Sustainable Consumption as

*... the use of services and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimising the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life-cycle so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations.*

(Norwegian Ministry for the Environment 1994)

This definition was taken up in the Sustainable Consumption Work Programme of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) (UN Commission on Sustainable Development 1995). Countless governmental and non-governmental meetings and publications since then refer to this definition. Sustainable Consumption seeks to achieve a high ratio of basic need fulfilment per resource use or, in other words, is an effective contribution to human well-being per resource use.

Most activities in the context of sustainable consumption (Committee on Sustainable Consumption and Production) concentrate on the aspect of product (production) efficiency. However, the most challenging point in the term is the effective provision of human well-being. On the first view it refers to the quality of services and the degree to which they meet human needs. The well-being effect can be expected to be quite high when the service fulfils basic needs like food or shelter. It can be strongly expected, too, to be less high if the service is one's 20th pair of shoes, however efficiently they have been produced in the previous steps.

On the second view the inclusion of human well-being in the concept of Sustainable Consumption points towards two crucial questions: “For what should the available resources be used best?” and “What contributes to human well-being beside goods and their services?”

Regarding the first question the normative approach of Sustainable Consumption implies channelling resource use towards those consumers where marginal utility is highest. This indicates in turn the need to ensure that reductions in material consumption fall on those with the lowest marginal utility of consumption, the wealthy (Beddoe, Costanza et al. 2009).

The latter question opens the perspective to recognise that – as soon as some basic material need fulfilment is ensured –further, non material factors gain increasing importance for the wellbeing of humans like safety, belongingness, social coherence, equity, and social relations (Scitovsky 1992; Rauschmayer, Omann et al. 2008).

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## **2 Setting the scene**

Humanity is facing a variety of serious threats: on the environmental side we know about global warming and resource scarcity, on the social side we observe increasing inequity, and economically the threats of peak oil and the reliance on growth, innovation and technological solutions build a locked in situation in a system, increasing the problems instead of solving them. Beyond the effects on humans themselves further burden is placed on the biosphere and biodiversity. All this calls for radical changes (Tukker 2008).

This paper strives to sharpen the discussion on how radical the changes have to be. This is important as Sustainable Consumption is used with different meanings by its proponents, depending on whether they see economic and market aspects or the limitations of the Earth's resources and carrying capacity as the core of Sustainable Consumption. This frequently leads to misunderstandings among political actors as well as scholars using the same words but having substantially different concepts in mind.

The following chapter distinguishes between three different understandings of sustainable consumption. It argues why the most used concept within the political debate is insufficient and therefore calls for a broader approach taking limits into account and allow search for a degrowth path.

## 2.1 The systemic challenges for our consumption patterns

As indicated above our consumption patterns has to face various challenges from climate change via the limits and overuse of resources to delivering problems of appraised easy technological and win-win solutions (Lorek 2010). With foreseeable limits of (cheap) oil and the lack of alternatives our energy based highly industrialized and globalized lifestyle is obviously under strain. It is not just a matter of how to produce goods with less energy or how to transport them around the globe. It also challenges our suburban lifestyle where we live, work, recreate and shop in different places and thus have to travel constantly between them.

Based on experience truckers blockade of oil depots in the UK Simms painted a worrying picture of the vulnerable dependence of developed economies on the oil distribution network, which had been organized along just-in-time delivery principles.' If the provision of gasoline within an economy is blocked, the supermarket shelves could be bare within three days. With this in mind he provocatively suggests that we are nine meals from anarchy (Simms 2008).

However, the term Sustainable Consumption on a political agenda is not always seen in this light. In fact, the dimension of the problem(s) is getting clearer only vaguely so far. This is why talks and writings about sustainable consumption can carry different meanings (Princen 1999; Røpke 1999).<sup>1</sup>

- First, Sustainable Consumption can refer to sustainable resource consumption, taking into account the complete product life cycle. In this context, the term stands for limiting the consumption of depletable resources, often via more efficient use or by their substitution with renewable resources and the use of renewable resources limited to their reproduction rate. Sustainable resource consumption involves the consumption patterns of industries, Governments, households and individuals. (United Nations 1992).
- Secondly, Sustainable Consumption can be used in the sense of macro economics as aggregate term of public and private consumption. In this context it focuses on the demand by public and private households and its responsibility for the ecological consequences of consumption decisions. This neglects the responsibility of business

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<sup>1</sup> This collection of understandings of the term Sustainable Consumption lists three aspects only. It jumps from efficient resource consumption to demand aspects. What is left out is the step of production efficiency, which is, for example, in the center of industrial ecology.

and industry and instead awards them the function of mere providers of more sustainable consumption options (European Commission 2008).

- Third, Sustainable Consumption can be limited to private consumption only, as reflected in the concepts of sustainable household consumption or sustainable consumption behaviour (Thorgersen and Ölander 2003; von Geibler, Kuhndt et al. 2004; Lucas, Brooks et al. 2008). Here emphasis is given to case studies and single product advice to consumers. Only this third understanding in most cases explicitly includes the social aspects of Sustainable Consumption mainly manifested in the support of fair trade products (Raynolds 2002; Smith 2007).

Agenda 21 mainly argues in the sense of sustainable resource consumption and thus calls for significant changes in the consumption patterns of industries, governments, households and individuals (United Nations 1992).

I like to support this argument which seems to be the most useful not only for strategic reasons but for conceptual ones, too. Only such a broad understanding helps to bridge between individual consumption and resource management in the light of life cycle thinking (Mont and Bleischwitz 2007). Additionally it overcomes the partly artificial distinction between production and consumption which is rooted in the economic distinction between business and households and helps to include resource use which is provided without entering the market like food provision from subsistence production (Røpke 2009).

## **2.2 Optimising products and services: a Weak Sustainable Consumption approach**

As a result of the narrow focus on commodities, on products and services, one of the major elements of today's Sustainable Consumption discourse is to encourage consumers to play their roles as active market actors and to take responsibility to buy green or more sustainable products (European Commission 2008).

This can predominantly be observed in those strains of the political and scientific discourse coming from production efficiency, which originally talked about sustainable production.

Product and production efficiency is, for example, used in the approach of Integrated Product Policy (Rubik and Scholl 2002; Scheer and Rubik 2006; Rehfeld, Rennings et al. 2007). Here, the environmental impacts of products have to be reduced along the life-cycle of the products from cradle to grave. This is also a major topic for proponents of ecological modernisation, who emphasise the possibility of decoupling economic growth from resource use through technological innovation (Ayres and Simonis 1993; Weizsäcker, Lovins et al. 1998), and proponents of industrial ecology (Ayres, Ayres et al. 1996; Erkman 1997). A good overview on these debates provide Dryzek or Garner (Dryzek 1997; Garner 2000).

I argue that such a perception roughly reflects a Weak Sustainable Consumption concept as it asks for relative improvements, but does not refer to absolute limits such as those for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions at a country or regional level.

For instance, the third meeting of the so called “Marrakech Process”—the international support process for the development of a “Ten Year Framework of Programmes for Sustainable Consumption and Production” as assigned in the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg 2002 (United Nations 2002)—highlighted the “role of informed consumers in driving change towards more sustainable products and production” in its meeting report and the co-chairs’ summary (UN DESA and UNEP 2007). Similar notions can be found in documents of the European Commission; for example, in its “Sustainable Consumption and Production and Sustainable Industrial Policy Action Plan” (European Commission 2008). This action plan talks about “smarter consumption”, “better products”, as well as “global markets for sustainable products”.

This Sustainable Consumption concept is referred to as SCP in recent political documents. While officially this serves as abbreviation for ‘Sustainable Consumption and Production’ in fact it reflects on ‘Sustainable Consumer Procurement’ (Fedrigo and Hontelez 2010). The assumption is that several green and sustainable alternatives are available on the market and that production of these alternatives should be supported and encouraged by consumers through their purchasing decisions. Additionally, increasing demand should induce innovation for more sustainable products and services. This is supposed to lead to changes within the current economic system towards sustainable growth (Ricci 2008). The appearance of this perspective does not come as a surprise. Instead, it is rooted in the fact that the task of working on SCP in opinion-leading countries rests in national ministry departments that formerly dealt with integrated product policy (IPP). As a result, the perception of Sustainable Consumption as an aspect of product policy is quite understandable.

There is indeed some evidence that changes in consumer demand can lead to changes in the markets. Water saving appliances and so-called “white goods” like washing machines and refrigerators are typical examples here. Still, other appliances have failed to become less resource consuming over time, like TV sets and cars for which other criteria than efficiency are major selection factors for consumers.

Without doubt such a product-based (and partly service-based) approach relying on technological development and its success in the market is a necessary step towards Sustainable Consumption.

However, this approach has two major shortcomings, rendering it of limited success only within the rational boundaries of efficiency for a specific product, but not economy wide (Graus and Worrell 2009).

One of these drawbacks is the monetary aspect. Via the rebound effect (Berkhout, Muskens et al. 2000; Greening, Greene et al. 2000; Binswanger 2001) the money saved—for instance through reduced electricity costs—is spent on other items such as other electric goods (EEA 2006). More services are demanded, more products have to be produced, more physical input is needed and thus more resources are used. Additionally, due to economic growth in general, more money is available to be spent and obviously, each euro, dollar or other currency spent is related to additional resource use.

Secondly, along with the increasing consumption demand in developed countries also Earth population in general and the global consumer class are increasing.

Costanza suggests that in order to reach sustainability in the event of insecure technological development we should strive for the best in technological innovation, but nevertheless maintaining a pessimistic view and risk averse policies (Costanza 1989). Only this way disasters can be avoided in the case technology can't solve the problems allowing a balanced living for most people on earth, even if it is at the price of only moderate (economic) development in the case technological innovation indeed find solutions solving all our problems. Figure 1 illustrates the argument.

Figure 1. Pay-off matrix for approaches of environmental uncertainty

		Living situation for global population	
		Technology can solve the problems	Technology can't solve the problems
Policy approach	Weak Sustainable Consumption Policy	High material standard of living for some. Less poverty for others?	Living in misery for most
	Strong Sustainable Consumption Policy	High human well-being for most	Balanced living for most

Adapted from (Costanza 1989)

To summarise, considering the ecological challenges we face, slight adjustments within the system relying mainly on technological solutions and a product-based Sustainable Consumption approach runs the risk sooner or later of encountering long expected disasters from a peak in oil supply to climate change. At best, this approach can postpone disasters (Garner 2000). Thus, relying on a product-based approach can only lead to weak

sustainable consumption patterns. In fact, it is rather a greening approach for selected products, for some individuals or a few lifestyle groups than a coherent concept (Hartmann 2009).

### **2.3 Requesting levels and patterns of consumption: a Strong Sustainable Consumption approach**

That the product-based approach of Sustainable Consumption that focuses on product availability falls short has broadly been explored in the rich academic literature on Sustainable Consumption. Several edited volumes of academic journals (Noorman and Uiterkamp 1998; Westra and Werhane 1998; Cohen and Murphy 2001; Princen, Maniates et al. 2002; Røpke and Reisch 2004; Jackson 2006), special issues (Ecological Economics 1999; International Journal of Sustainable Development 2001; Journal of Industrial Ecology 2005; International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development 2007; Journal of Cleaner Production 2007; International Journal of Consumer Studies 2009) and countless individual books and conferences include contributions highlighting the systemic weaknesses of the “weak” approach and emphasise the need for a stronger approach towards Sustainable Consumption.

Therefore, in this section, I introduce the concept of Strong Sustainable Consumption.<sup>2</sup> As opposed to its weak form, Strong Sustainable Consumption covers a broader scope that includes products and efficiency, but also goes beyond these concerns.

First of all, in the original Agenda 21, consumption in this concept is understood as resource consumption. This includes consumption by industries, public consumption and household consumption. Additionally, the concept explicitly values all contributions to enhance product-, production- and sourcing efficiency.

However, in the Strong Sustainable Consumption approach it is not the markets, the economy and the support for proactive entrepreneurs that are focused upon, but rather the resources available (including the available sink capacity of the ecosystem) and the manner of their distribution among the Earth’s population. In this sense, this concept refers back to the roots of the Rio conference in 1992: environment and development.

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<sup>2</sup> This should not be confused with the concept of strong and weak sustainability (Pearce, D. W., A. Markandya, and E. B. Barbier. 1989. *Blueprint for a green economy*. Earthscan).

Strong Sustainable Consumption includes giving specific attention to the levels and patterns of consumption. In doing so, it also recognises consumers as responsible citizens and accepts the social embeddedness of behavioural decisions. Additionally, it strengthens social developments to perceive well-being as independent from material commodities (Layard 2005; Marks, Simms et al. 2006) and to increase human well-being through social structures (Hofstetter and Madjar 2003).

Opportunities for Strong Sustainable Consumption obviously presuppose radical changes, social innovations and thinking out of the box. As Hunter phrases it: simple things won't save the world (Hunter 1997).

On the political level the most remarkable approach pointing in the direction of Strong Sustainable Consumption is laid out in the UNEP publication "Consumption Opportunities" (UNEP 2001). There, efficient consumption (dematerialisation) is explicitly distinguished from different consumption (changing infrastructure and choices), conscious consumption (choosing and using more consciously), and appropriate consumption (questioning levels and drivers of consumption). In doing so, the report explores perspectives of Sustainable Consumption beyond the weak one and points to steps necessary to complement the product-based dematerialisation strategies which Weak Sustainable Consumption is limited to.

A Strong Sustainable Consumption approach reaches beyond consumption as an economic activity taking place in markets based on monetary values. For example, it also reflects the way time is used (Jalas 2002; Spangenberg and Lorek 2002a; Maniates 2009). Strong Sustainable Consumption patterns rely much more on activities like neighbourhood exchange, community or subsistence work (Manzini and Jégou 2003). This concept thus involves social dimensions as it helps to integrate, for example, questions of social coherence or gender issues (Schultz, Empacher et al. 2001). Further on, it regards people not only in terms of their function as consumers, but as citizens as such. In this sense, it is also directed towards sustainable lifestyles (Reusswig 2010).

The sufficiency concept elaborated in the societal sustainability discourse fits this context of Strong Sustainable Consumption quite well. It complements the efficiency approach in so far as it not only asks how to do things right (Hanley) but how to do the right things (Sachs, Loske et al. 1998). In other words, there can be enough and there can even be too much (Princen 2005). While sufficiency is predominately interpreted as an individual approach, Princen argues that the idea of sufficiency can be an organising principle for society (Princen 2005). Such a structural perception of sufficiency does indeed seem to be necessary as Alcott points out that resource consumption avoided through individual acts of sufficiency is

quite likely made up by other groups of the emerging consumer class and does not increase the amount available for those who need an increase in consumption most (Alcott 2008; Beddoe, Costanza et al. 2009).

Other prominent example of practical experiments with Sustainable Consumption is the voluntary simplicity movement (Elgin 1993; Maniates 2002; Doherty and Etzioni 2003) which has recently gained attention in marketing concepts such as LOVOS “Lifestyle of Voluntary Simplicity” or voluntary downshifting (Hamilton 2009). These approaches form an important contribution to Strong Sustainable Consumption in affluent, over-consuming population groups.

All this may, to some extent, create the impression that Strong Sustainable Consumption is about voluntary personal sacrifice. Yet, this would be to misinterpret the concept. While personal values—as well as cultural and societal ones—do indeed play a vital role in Strong Sustainable Consumption, the focus of the argument is on the structural changes that are required. This is where governance becomes important. Several scientific approaches have already started to explore these kinds of substantial structural changes that seek to go beyond the inclusion of external costs into prices or other market-related approaches. Such changes are reflected in the concepts of System Innovation (Tukker 2008), Evolutionary Economics (Boulding 1991), or Critical Realism (Bhaskar 1978; Archer 1998; Lorek 2010).

In my own argumentation on how to foster Strong Sustainable Consumption I take what was formerly called a “Northern” perspective (Galbraith 1958; Schor 1998) and is nowadays called the perspective of the global consumer class. As seen above, I am mostly talking about the reduction of consumption and the environmental and social burdens that consumption causes (Dauvergne 2008). However, I am fully aware that for a large share of the world’s population consumption can only become sustainable if it is increased to a sufficient level first (Sen 1999). The situation of those people with low consumption capacities is taken into account in my argumentation in so far as the reduction targets of the affluent have to be high enough to leave resources and ensure sustainable consumption for the poor, too.

To summarise, the line of distinction between Weak and Strong Sustainable Consumption is a sharp one. In fact, I argue that Sustainable Consumption is a misleading term when used in the product-based ‘SCP’ context. Instead, the term ‘greening the markets’ or ‘Sustainable Consumer Procurement’ better describes what the proponents of Weak Sustainable Consumption seek.

### **3. Research needs for Strong Sustainable Consumption policies**

The insights I have gained during my research as well as in political discussions indicate that there is no lack of knowledge in general regarding what is the right direction towards Sustainable Consumption, at least not according to its ecological components: nutrition, housing and mobility have to be organised in a more sustainable way. Even the proponents of Weak Sustainable Consumption generally target their measures in that direction. Only they tend to be too tentative. However, two other aspects have been undervalued so far. One is how to implement measures properly and the second is the speed with which changes have to take place.

To start with the latter, to increase the speed of change research has to increase the sense of urgency and to make the need for action and implementation more visible. Therefore it has to come up with clear and time-bound targets of what has to be reduced by when to remain within our ecological limits. What is developed in the debate on climate change has to be adapted in other areas, too. Scientifically solid targets have to serve here as orientation points for political and societal development (EEA 2008).

To help with implementation it seems we have to overcome the barriers presented by mainstream thinking which is dominated by economic reasoning.

An important contribution here is the development of alternative how to measure and communicate what contributes to human well-being. While the need for such measures is increasingly recognised (European Communities 2007; New Economics Foundation 2009), further substantial research is needed to find solid answers (Stiglitz, Sen et al. 2009).

Support has been developed as well for the emerging scientific and partly political discourse on “decroissance” (poorly translated up to now as de-growth) (Flipo and Schneider 2008; Hinterberger, Hutterer et al. 2009; Kallis, Schneider et al. 2010). Research on this topic is overdue (Lorek 1993) as it has the potential to develop scenarios showing that a shrinking economy does not have to lead to social decline (unsustainable de-growth) but happy de-growth with an increase or at least stability of well-being is possible (Jackson 2009; Bilancini and D'Alessandro 2010; Spangenberg 2010).

Both strains of research could help to overcome the reservations of proponents of Weak Sustainable Consumption to economic shrinking and their view that a happy (because sustainable) growth is somehow possible.

Research is also needed regarding the social aspects of Sustainable Consumption. Two aspects in particular appear to have been weakly elaborated so far.

First, various practical experiences of how to organise consumption and lifestyles in a sustainable way are carried out on a micro level. Structured investigations on how to shift

those social innovations from the micro to the macro level could be improved (Manzini and Jégou 2003; Seyfang 2009).

Second, for the full assessment of goods and services within the context of sustainable development, social and socio-economic life cycle assessment (LCA) should complement the environmental one. While a first approach has been made to develop guidelines for such an approach (UNEP 2009) the field is still open for carrying out such LCAs.

Finally, NGOs need support from research in the form of guidance, not only on what to effectively campaign for or demand from policy making but also on how to best achieve political influence. New and better strategies of lobbying and campaigning might develop more quickly if there was closer cooperation between science and practice.

#### **4. Necessities for political change**

Beside further research along the lines adumbrated above it is mainly political and societal change that is needed. The following 6 aspects seem to be most crucial without claiming to cover the full picture.

##### **4.1 Heading the adverse wind**

One of the major challenges for Strong Sustainable Consumption is that it is not in line with the dominant political and societal worldview, mainly the belief in economic growth as recipe to cure all ills. Last years G20 meeting in its “Leaders Statement” argued that it is growth which has to be sustained (Group of 20 2009). And so do countless other high level political documents such as the Lisbon Treaty where concern about growth appears frequently while consumption only appears in the context of the ‘strengthening of private consumption in phases of weak economic growth’. For a few months following the economic crisis in autumn 2008 there was some hope that the investments promised by all state leaders would steer development towards more sustainability. But while Korea for example had more than 80% of ecological investments in its stimulus package, the EU countries had only 5-10%. However the attempt to merge Sustainable Consumption with the financial debate should not be given up (Cohen 2007).

Sustainable Consumption is not a topic on high-level political agendas and if it is, it is in the form of Weak Sustainable Consumption as it does not contradict mainstream thinking. Accordingly considerations on sustainable consumption are missing in precisely those institutions that contribute most to shaping patterns of consumption, like the WTO and big business organizations. With its explicit reservations on economic growth, Strong Sustainable Consumption is hardly in the short-term interest of powerful actors.

The lack, if not total absence of, support from powerful actors also limits the focus of those organizations which have taken up the challenge of sustainable consumption. As a result they steer the discussion to ‘harmless’ topics. An attempt to at least start a discussion on systemic changes within the Marrakech Process headed by UNEP/UN DESA through including agenda setting activities on “topics too hot to handle” in the 10 Year Framework of Programms failed immediately (SCORE Network 2008). The OECD still devoted huge efforts to exploring the willingness to pay for more sustainable goods and services (OECD 2009 ). Nevertheless, the barriers and adverse winds hindering Strong Sustainable Consumption do not change at all the ecological and social facts that we are facing. But they do influence the strategies developed on how to approach them.

#### **4.2 Carrot and stick to stimulate the public debate**

First of all, those promoting Strong Sustainable Consumption in favour of “greening the market” should more clearly differentiate between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ forms in order to structure the debate more clearly.

To open up the debate to a broader audience, including the public as well as policy makers, a two-pronged strategy is necessary: that is, a carrot and stick approach.

The stick in this case is to create a sense of urgency. This means promoting the idea that reducing consumption is not an option, but is going to come anyway. There are evident ecological limits that we can either actively anticipate or passively allow to overcome us. In any case, limits will substantially harm economic growth. How to ensure a soft landing instead of a hard one solely depends on the proponents of Strong Sustainable Consumption to get the message across in due time.

As has already been developed for climate change we need clear and scientifically conclusive scenarios about how our lives will be influenced by resource scarcity and especially the peak in oil supply. Those scenarios especially have to highlight the social costs of inaction and the risks for social security from a local to global level.

On this basis, sustainability targets have to be developed regarding how to stay within these ecological limits, including time tables for what to reach by when and who has to contribute what. Research can (only) provide the first step here. Societal agreements on how to act on these recommendations as well as the control over the decisions made are the task of governance processes and thus of governments.

For the time being, a promising approach at least in terms of clearly indicating how the general impact of consumption is developing is being constructed by the European Environmental Agency. Their indicator set for Sustainable Consumption explicitly strives to answer questions like ‘is the environmental pressure activated by consumption sustainable?’ (EEA and ETC/SCP 2009) Assuming they will take an indicator like the Ecological Footprint to answer the question the target is implicitly given: restricting the resource use per year to the annual production capacity of the planet.

The carrot in this case is to better bring to attention that a shrinking of economic processes is not as much a disaster as mainstream economics suggests. Well-being in developed countries has for a long period already been successfully decoupled from economic growth. This needs to be communicated more offensive. Alternative measures of well-being (New Economics Foundation 2009; Stiglitz, Sen et al. 2009) can help to overcome growth addiction (van Griethuysen 2009). It is important to better highlight other elements of well-being than increasing consumption, like wealth of time. Examples like the US initiative “Take

Back Your Time” for reducing working hours and extended holidays are a valid contribution to Strong Sustainable Consumption without explicitly focusing on consumption (Maniates 2010). Also a public discourse on happiness can help to consider the limitations on increasing human well-being through material consumption as soon as it reaches and goes beyond a certain level of need fulfilment (Hofstetter and Madjar 2003; Layard 2005).

#### **4.3 Demanding responsibility of governments in governance**

The actual debate on Sustainable Consumption in political circles shows the same epistemic fallacy as the discussions about the priority fields of action on Sustainable Consumption did ten years ago. All tend to use the policy strategy that is being talked about the most. And this dominant strategy is still information provision. There is ample evidence that hard policies like regulatory instruments and economic instruments are most effective (Rehfeld, Rennings et al. 2007; ASCEE team 2008; Lorek, Giljum et al. 2008). This message is as strong as the message “care for the consumption clusters food, housing and mobility”. While the latter is accepted, the former is still widely ignored. Instead huge efforts are made again and again to increase informational instruments. The policy instrument of information provision, however, appears to be as ineffective in the policy instrument canon as the call to switch off stand-by appliances in the debate about Sustainable Consumption priorities. Scientific insight on the effectiveness of policy instruments obviously must be communicated to political decision makers in a more convincing way. This includes governments’ responsibility to phase out unsustainable consumption options (Church and Lorek 2007) or choice editing as it is called lately (Maniates 2009).

Another delay in taking action towards Strong Sustainable Consumption is caused by the retreat of government in favour of governance. In general the governance approach – for example, in the development of Sustainable Consumption Strategies or Action Plans – is applaudable. However, the weakness in implementing the agreements produced by such strategies makes the effort needed for their development rather questionable. Whatever governance processes come up with, control over the follow up and its implementation is the task of governments. They have to ensure that contributions dedicated to specific actors to reach agreed targets are indeed carried out. As long as national governments understand their roles in the governance of Sustainable Consumption as one of providing opportunities for the exchange of opinions and voluntary commitments that are not controlled, a significant drive towards Strong Sustainable Consumption will fail to materialize (Berg 2006).

#### **4.4 Appreciating the potential of social innovation**

Important incentives for Strong Sustainable Consumption are quite likely to come from social innovation. A countless number of initiatives are on the way from food co-operatives to public gardening, the provision of services with explicit sustainable character, neighbourhood centers, and alternative, local currencies (Seyfang and Smith 2007; Seyfang 2009). The potential of such approaches remain insufficiently explored. But on closer examination they are development projects for the global North which can have the same model role as traditional development projects have in the global South (Lorek 1996). What is needed is to bring successful experiments from the micro to the macro level. This is not restricted to the question of how to multiply such approaches but more about how to establish political macro structures to foster this (Löwe 2009).

#### **4.5 Utilizing the advantages of multi-level governance**

Sustainable Consumption is a typical field where success depends on activities on all levels of governance. The challenge is to ensure a proper exchange between these levels.

Action at different levels needs to be coordinated so that ambitious local actions are supported by national and international institutions and can feed back their results and experiences into national and international processes. If there is no coherent linking between the different policy agendas, ambitious local projects are no more likely to make a significant impact on Strong Sustainable Consumption than the high-level talk shops in the global context. Coherent positioning and linking is necessary from local to global and back (Lorek 2005). Thus, timely information about the political processes is as necessary at the grassroots level as a valid pool of examples from local initiatives to inspire national and international work on Sustainable Consumption. This requires the engagement and responsibility of those representing the different stakeholders in the higher level panels. The actual situation, for example, regarding the flow of information from the Advisory Committee of the Marrakech Process, still allows for a lot of improvement.

#### **4.6 Sharpening NGO strategies**

Non Governmental Organisations, especially those working on the environment, development, and consumer issues, need to distance themselves from 'weak' sustainable consumption and from addressing consumers merely as consumers, rather than as citizens. To foster acceptance for such policies NGOs have an important, more strategically oriented role to play than they have adopted so far (Akenji 2007). Increasingly this is a catalyst role, as they don't have massive resources to implement many initiatives themselves. What NGOs can do is bring people together and inspire them. They are in a key position to induce

societal debate and awareness regarding the steps needed to reach Strong Sustainable Consumption. Communication and discourse are basic conditions for fostering the changes required. NGOs can hardly be replaced in developing values and visions of Sustainable Consumption and fostering citizen engagement (Lorek 2003; Spangenberg and Lorek 2003). The more complicated the issue, the more important it is to take up the catalyst role. Only in this way can politics be brought back to Sustainable Consumption instead of greening the market.

As part of the strategic re-orientation, environmental campaigning has to overcome the habit of promoting Sustainable (in fact green) Consumption by marketing strategies. Instead of encouraging individuals to adopt simple and painless behavioural changes that have highly questionable potential – as has recently been seen with the LOHAS movement (Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability) – an alternative approach to motivate pro-environmental behavioural change is required in order to get people to engage in more significant changes. Such an approach no longer draws on analogies from marketing strategies, but rather from political strategies articulating what it stands for and which values it is driven by. Studies already confirm that an appeal to environmental values is more likely to lead to a spill-over into other pro-environmental patterns of behaviour than an appeal to financial self-interest or social status (WWF-UK 2008; WWF-UK 2009).

Those who have already worked on Sustainable Consumption issues for a longer period of time may benefit from convincing other local and national NGOs of the relevance of Strong Sustainable consumption for their current field of work. For a broad majority of NGOs there is still a lack of clear understanding about the emerging challenges of the issue (Church and Lorek 2007). Most NGOs working on isolated topics such as energy or food, voluntary simplicity or cleaner production can be connected to a Sustainable Consumption perspective. The link just has to be made visible (Barber 2007).<sup>3</sup> This awareness that their different tasks have a common goal can strengthen their voice and their power to bring out change.

Increased political effectiveness also has to grow from improved coalition building by NGOs with other Civil Society Organisations such as academia or trade unions. Experience shows that lobbying efforts are more successful if they bundle various arguments from various groups of society.

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<sup>3</sup> The same seems to be true and useful for the different stakeholders on the governmental side, overcoming the narrow thinking within the boundaries of government departments

Besides backing up each other in content and argumentation, academia can be supportive for NGO engagement in another sense. Scientific efforts can help to improve their effectiveness in pointing out gaps in the strategies that NGOs are using and suggest improvements in detecting ineffective strategies (Narberhaus, Lorek et al. 2009).

## 5. Conclusion

In political as well as academic debate on Sustainable Consumption one should be precise about the own understanding and concept what sustainable consumption is and how sustainability can be reached. Attention is also needed to recognize that others might have a different concept in mind, just using the same words.

There is a crucial distinction between a weak approach to Sustainable Consumption and Strong Sustainable Consumption. The line of distinction is blurred in case of single activities. To reach Strong Sustainable Consumption will need lots of activities and initiatives used in the context of weak Sustainable Consumption like efficiency innovations or market incentives. However, from the conceptual perspective the line of distinction is a sharp one. In fact, I argue that Sustainable Consumption is a misleading term when it is restricted to an efficiency, product-based 'SCP' approach and technological and (best win-win) market solutions are expected to solve the problems. Then instead, the terms 'greening the markets' or 'Sustainable Consumer Procurement' better describe what the proponents of Weak Sustainable Consumption seek. Only including limits, strict boundaries of resource use, fair share of environmental space, inclusion and support of social innovation and development of planful degrowth paths offer the possibility to achieve a sustainable consumption before Earth's limits force us to de-grow consumption anyway.

A lot of energy is needed to bring Strong Sustainable Consumption forward. The motivation for its proponents is that there is no alternative. Lots of efforts have to be taken on multiple levels by multiple actors. All of them are needed as they are the strings which build the rope. However, pulling in the same direction has to be improved.

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