

## P5.1-3 Transforming Consumption towards a Low Carbon Society

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Sustainable development, meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, requires a fundamental reorientation of society. Deep cuts are needed, in GHG emissions as well as in our consumption of many key resources. So far, these trends are still going in the wrong direction. There are few examples where substantial global reductions in environmental burden have been achieved in absolute terms. Some progress has been made towards so-called relative decoupling – reduced environmental burden per unit of economic activity – but this is far from sufficient for ensuring a sustainable development. What is required is: (i) absolute reductions of emissions and resource extraction, (ii) reductions to levels that are sustainable over the long run – in many cases to much lower levels than currently, and (iii) reduction rates that ensure sustainable levels to be reached before major negative impacts have been made. All this needs to be achieved with a world population which is expected to increase by around 30 percent over the next four decades.

### **The need for changes in consumption patterns**

Historical data on technological development shows that it is highly unlikely that such a profound transformation of society can be achieved only through technological change. New technologies certainly have a very important role to play, but sustainability strategies that place too much emphasis on technology are not likely to be successful; Consumption patterns – the amount and kinds of goods and services consumed – also have to change. However, at present, the need for changing consumption patterns is not fully recognised by political leaders and society at large, the processes that drive and shape consumption are insufficiently researched and therefore poorly understood, and the knowledge on how consumption can be influenced in a sustainable direction is weak.

Consumption involves individuals, but cannot be adequately understood if studied only as activities conducted by individuals. Consumption has strong

social and cultural aspects that also need to be considered. Based on this notion of consumption as something done by individuals in a social context, this paper provides a few ideas on how consumption might be more adequately understood and how unsustainable patterns of consumption may be more effectively addressed.

### **Factors driving unsustainable consumption are poorly understood**

Escalating consumption has been studied for a long time and a number of contributing factors have been identified: (i) Social comparison – consumption as a marker of social status, (ii) Creation of self-identity – consumption as a way of creating and communicating images of who we are and what we stand for, (iii) Mental stimulation – consumption as a way of fulfilling our desire for novelty and as a way to avoid boredom, (iv) Matching – consumption of additional goods and services triggered by a certain buying decision (such as the new sofa that made you change the wall paper and the curtains as well), and (v) Specialisation within everyday life – the emergence of increasing numbers of items with highly specialised purposes (such as the indispensable asparagus peeler and the special glasses for drinking Grappa).

However, it has been pointed out that most studies of the factors behind increasing consumption have focused on certain types of consumption, especially the ‘conspicuous consumption’ of individuals, which is highly visible to others. As a consequence, important as these factors may be for explaining certain forms of consumption, they offer little to our understanding of for example how home-owners can be convinced to insulate their houses, how the sustainability impact of government spending can be reduced, or how people can change their conceptions of a normal indoor temperature. Additional research is therefore needed on how to change habitual, largely unreflected, consumption behaviour, on how to reap the potential of green public procurement, and on how to influence social conceptions on what is considered normal and

desirable in a sustainable direction.

### **Consumption is enabled and constrained by socio-technical regimes**

People don't primarily consume energy or other resources, or emit GHG; they engage in social practices that for the time being are considered as normal and appropriate. They do things that they see many other people doing – things that provide comfort, convenience, excitement, meaning and social status. This perspective is important for efforts to influence consumer behaviour; simply asking people to cut down their emissions is typically ineffective since it doesn't relate to how people are normally thinking about their own practices.

Furthermore, consumption is not a set of isolated acts of purchasing and using goods and services but rather a set of practices which are made possible by complex socio-technical systems (regimes), involving:

- technology;
- social norms and values;
- laws, regulations and standards;
- knowledge and know-how;
- habits; and
- supporting infrastructure.

Such regimes enable certain forms of consumption but, at the same time, they also constrain consumer behaviour. Regimes change over time, but more radical transformations typically require changes in several of the regime components. Interventions aimed at a promoting regime transformation towards sustainability therefore needs to address the systems level. This calls for efforts that go far beyond what individual consumers can achieve by trying to change their habits.

### **A broader view of consumers and lifestyles is essential**

Sustainable consumption is often thought of as consumers 'voting with their wallets' thereby greening the market. However, this view is very narrow and ignores the fact that many changes towards sustainable consumption require collective decisions – changes that cannot be achieved through the market. Moving towards sustainable consumption requires not only consumers choosing less unsustainable products but

also a number of other – enabling – actions, such as: editing out options with high environmental impact from the market, providing credible information and guidance on more sustainable options, making more sustainable options more widely and easily accessible, correcting the price signals so that options with high impact cost more, and stimulating research and development towards more sustainable options than currently found on the market. A broader and more productive view therefore needs to acknowledge that individual also play other roles than as consumers and that they can do a lot to promote sustainable consumption in these other roles. They can work towards a stronger enabling of SCP for example through the political process in their country/city, through direct actions in their local community, and through the influence they have in their profession.

Looking at individuals only as consumers – asking how consumers' choices can be made more sustainable – offers a limited range of opportunities for positive change. Consumption patterns needs to be regarded as being part of lifestyles; consumption is only a subset of all those activities that make up a certain lifestyle. This distinction is essential, because needs that are currently satisfied through the consumption of goods or services (some of them with high climate impacts) could potentially be satisfied through other, less resource and carbon intensive, activities. It is thus important to critically study the contribution of consumption to fulfilling lifestyles, and to explore how low-impacting high quality lifestyles can be more widely adopted and what role consumption is playing in such lifestyles.

More and more people in developed countries realise that increased consumption adds little or nothing to their quality of life. It might even become a burden if they have to work more overtime or put themselves in debt in order to afford increasing their consumption. A better work-life balance where people work less, earn a bit less money, spend more time with their families and friends and on developing their personal interests, do voluntary work on things they find meaningful and fun, are healthier and less stressed, is likely to have many benefits, including climate benefits. How can such downshifting be encouraged? How can we make it feel normal and attractive for large groups of people to choose such slower, more leisure-oriented and less consumption-based, lifestyles?