

## 2. Sustainable consumption

### 2.1 Making sense of sustainable consumption

Sustainable development has been described as “at once a scientific principle, a political goal, a social practice and a moral guideline” (Blowers 1997, p. 846). The precise meaning of this comprehensive term remains elusive because the Brundtland definition – “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987, p. 59) – accommodates widely different interpretations. Although the later evolution of the concept of sustainable development has specified that it consists of the three 'pillars' of social, economic, and environmental sustainability (WSSD 2002), the wide spectrum of normativities attached to the term continues to produce disparate theories and actions under the banner of sustainable development; it has invariably found its use in legislature, policy, academia, social movements and business strategies. At its core, sustainable development is expressing views on the appropriate relationship between humans and nature, and as such it envelops normative assumptions ranging from 'strong technocentric' (nature is another form of capital) to 'strong ecocentric' (nature has intrinsic value) (Hopwood et al. 2005). However, the human-nature interaction is largely conceptualised as a user-resource relationship across the sustainable development literature (Lee 2000), and sustainability has come to be “primarily an economic and anthropocentric notion” (Jamieson 1998, p. 191), and a discourse which effectively 'disenchants' nature (Curry 2006);.

Within the wider debate on sustainable development, sustainable consumption has become an established policy objective and a growing field of research. The term was first introduced as a global policy issue at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 with a mandate in Agenda 21 for changing consumption patterns. The meaning of sustainable consumption is equally ambiguous although the focus is narrowed to consumption, here defined by Stern (1997) as “human-induced transformations of materials and energy” which “is environmentally important to the extent that it makes materials or energy less available for future use” (p. 20). One of the earliest definitions of the term came from the Oslo Symposium on Sustainable Consumption in 1994. Here, sustainable consumption is:

“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 lifecycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations” (Ofstad, 1994).

This was adopted as UNEP's working definition and remains so today. Although this definition is hard to distinguish from that of sustainable development, UNEP proposes that 'systemic' sustainable consumption implies a shift in focus away from top-down policies:

“It engages, economically and socially, from the bottom up, using the actions and perspective of consumers and citizens as its starting point, rather than the big-picture assessments of the global environment of sustainable development discourse” (UNEP 2001, p. 14).

The new perspective that sustainable consumption has brought to the policy debate is thus a focus on the consumer-citizen in changing consumption patterns. In addition to efficiency measures and market-based instruments this means fostering “new concepts of wealth and prosperity which allow higher standards of living through changed lifestyles and are less dependent on the Earth's finite resources” (UNCED 1992, section 4.11).

Surveying various policy definitions of sustainable consumption, Hobson (2002) summarises the term as 'doing more with less', capturing the underlying assumption that “individuals should be able meet their own consumption needs whilst also taking the environmental impacts of their actions into account” (p. 96). In policy terms, sustainable consumption has been incorporated into the prevailing ecological modernisation discourse where the state acts to facilitate or enable environmentally friendly decisions through incentives, rather than control through regulation (Barry 2003). This discourse “does not threaten consumption as a form of practice but seeks to bind it to forms of knowledge – science, technology and efficiency – that embody the locus of power held by high-income countries in international relations” (Hobson 2002, p. 99). Sustainable consumption is in this way “not about consuming less, it is about consuming differently, consuming efficiently, and having an improved quality of life” (de Lardereel in UNEP 2001, p. 12). Thus, the same user-resource relationship that underpins most of the sustainability discourse is also found in the policy debates on sustainable consumption<sup>1</sup>.

As an academic field, sustainable consumption consists of diverse, and at times contradictory, literatures, dealing both with understanding consumption itself and conceptualising changes in consumption patterns. Jackson and Michaelis (2003) describe sustainable consumption as a 'debate within a debate' which is

1 This is indeed the foundation of Stern's notion of consumption cited above.

“embedded in a long and complex literature deriving from disciplines as diverse as consumer research, psychology, sociology, social philosophy, anthropology, and economics” (p. 5). They show how sustainable consumption is approached from a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives<sup>2</sup> and how transforming consumption involves changes in lifestyle, culture, discourse and narrative, values and attitudes, infrastructures, institutions and organisational modes. Despite, or perhaps because of, the differences in epistemological assumptions, methods and conceptual frameworks, the eclectic body of literature on sustainable consumption has produced a range of core insights into behavioural change. Jackson (2005) summarises the debate thus:

“...there are only a relatively limited number of quite specific avenues for behaviour change. Specifically, the literature suggests that humans learn new behaviours through trial and error, through persuasion, or through various forms of modelling (social learning)” (p. 106).

On the background of this observation – that new behaviours are largely adopted through trial and error, persuasion, or social learning – studies in sustainable consumption can proceed to focus on these areas and develop analyses of the different agencies and contexts in which changes in consumption occur.

If consumption is a social activity that 'makes sense to people' and 'concerns very important aspects of life' (Røpke 1999), sustainable consumption should be understood as the processes by which normative (sustainability) goals are actualised (or not) in dynamic social contexts set within the larger framework of cultural, social, political, and economic structures. Individual beliefs and norms, socio-cultural practices and socio-technical systems of provision are all important elements in understanding and analysing consumption patterns. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the idea of sustainable consumption itself arose because prevailing norms/beliefs, practices and systems of provision were deemed *unsustainable*. The inconspicuous consumption of everyday life is tied up with socio-material systems that are hard-wired for consumption (Burgess et al. 2003). Individuals are 'locked-in' to this situation, which is not just about material reality but includes everyday practical consciousness. Jackson (2005) articulates:

“we must think of individual behaviour as being 'locked-in' not just in a static but also in a dynamic sense. We are locked into behavioural trends as much as and possibly more than we are locked into specific fixed behaviours” (p. 105).

In this way, sustainable consumption is the study of how unsustainable consumption patterns are altered at the level of individuals, communities or whole economies. The direction of change in consumption *is* towards consuming less – it is about doing things differently in order to decrease the impact of unsustainable consumption, whether this is through efficiency measures, regulation, or personal change. As opposed to seeing sustainable consumption as 'doing more with less', which implies rationalisation and effectiveness, this might be captured better by 'living with lower impact'<sup>3</sup>. This process of change can then be studied from different normative grounds and viewed through a variety of (inter)disciplinary lenses.

## 2.2 Studying sustainability

That normativity is brought to the fore and made explicit is crucial to give analytic meaning to the term 'change in consumption patterns' and to avoid making sustainability a relative notion which ultimately is about 'change for the sake of change'. The consumption literature is riddled with paradoxes, such as the (micro-economic) rebound effect<sup>4</sup> and the (macro-economic) Khazzoom-Brookes postulate<sup>5</sup>, which highlight the problem of pursuing techno-centric sustainability policies without considering the behavioural responses that flow from technological improvements. Making assumptions explicit and grasping the politics is therefore fundamental in sustainability studies – if energy efficiency is the main policy route to sustainable consumption, it may well be that sustainability is merely pursuit of elite forms of knowledge. Further, given the counter-in-

2 E.g., chapter 3 *Understanding Consumption* examines: Consumption as well-being; Consumption and human needs; Consumerism as a Social and Psychological Pathology; Consumption as an Evolutionary Adaptation; Display Consumption and Status-Seeking; 'Ordinary' Consumption and Consumer 'Lock-in'; The Symbolic Role of Consumer Goods; Consumption and the Extended Self; Consumer Goods and Social Identity; Consumption and the Pursuit of Meaning.

3 This does not equate with 'low impact living' or 'reduction in carbon footprint', although it obviously overlaps. Rather, it is intended simply to denote ways of reducing unsustainable consumption levels. This term, in contrast with 'doing more with less', acknowledges that sustainable consumption is about systemic change as well as changes in how we live.

4 Energy (or resource) savings from more energy efficient technology can be offset by increases in consumption (Binswanger 2001).

5 The Khazzoom-Brookes postulate shows that increased energy efficiency on a macro-economic scale can actually increase energy use because, overall, more money is invested in energy-intensive goods and services than would be the case without the efficiency gain (Monbiot 2007).

tuitive effect of many standard policy options, it is imperative that the underlying values are discussed. As Røpke (1999) states: “the environmental benefits of a change in consumption practices in one area can easily be counterbalanced by increased consumption in other areas, if overall growth is not limited” (p. 401). Deep-seated ideas such as growth, development, and progress are all central to the debate on sustainable consumption.

Studying sustainable consumption therefore seems to require both acknowledging normativities and embracing the complexities of consumption. This is what the 'New Economics' approach to sustainable consumption does, insisting that “economics cannot be divorced from its foundations in environmental and social contexts” while “sustainability requires a realigning of development priorities away from the primary goal of economic growth towards wellbeing instead” (Seyfang 2009, p. 23). Combining a systemic perspective with a contextual understanding of agency, the New Economics approach focuses on analysis of social learning processes in order to gauge how sustainability initiatives and projects diffuse. The 'realigning of development priorities' also entails that academics recognise their own roles and viewpoints in the process of change. Seyfang (2009) articulates the New Economics vision thus:

“By proposing that societal systems of provision be examined, redesigned and reconfigured in line with sustainable consumption goals, the New Economics proposes nothing less than a paradigm shift for the economy, or a wholesale transition in the presiding 'regime'. This implies that rather than making incremental changes, the model entails a widespread regime change for the economy and society, altering the rules of the game and the objective of economic development” (p. 23).

This position recognises that the issue of sustainability is not just about 'consuming differently and efficiently' but an issue which goes to the heart of our self-understanding and our vision of what society might be.

Moreover, it takes seriously the fact that indicators of global resource consumption continue to point towards massive overuse of natural resources despite decades of sustainability policies (e.g. Burgess 2003), and that a large-scale, systemic shift in production and consumption patterns is needed to prevent resource depletion and rapid climate change (Steffen et al. 2007, IPCC 2007). It admits that these issues are not a result of separate environmental, social and economic crises but are rather part of one larger crisis<sup>6</sup> which reflects the cultural values, organisational modes and worldviews connected with modernity and late-capitalism (Jamieson 1998, Raskin et al. 2002, van der Leeuw 2008, Escobar 2009, Spratt et al. 2010, Lakoff 2010). And it also recognises that 'sustainability' is an inherently cross-disciplinary issue (Gallopín et al. 2001) as consumption patterns are bound up with socio-economic, cultural and political factors, displaying variable dynamics both at the micro-level of everyday consumption practices (Shove 2002) and at the macro-level of the political economy (Blowers 1997). Furthermore, as social-ecological systems are characterised by non-linear, emergent behaviour and irreducible uncertainties (Berkes 2007), they can never be fully known or understood (Gallopín 2004). This means that the space in which we think and act on a sustainability issue is of a lower level of complexity than the space of the problem itself<sup>7</sup>. This makes the normative position of New Economics important because, in a world of complexity and uncertainty, values and integrity are better measures of the likely development and impact of sustainability research than targets and good intentions.

However, sustainability research also has to avoid the trap of prescriptive analysis or proselytising. That sustainable consumption goals are not taken for granted is imperative. Both as a political project and a normative vision for the future, sustainability is a pluralistic concept that allows for a variety of interpretations, and the actualisation – or performance – of sustainability varies according to how it is framed by different social actors (Jasanoff 2005). The inherent epistemologies<sup>8</sup> and ontologies<sup>9</sup> that influence different modes of sustainability action should thus be examined carefully.

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6 At the Global System Dynamics and Policies conference 'Towards a science of global systems' in Brussels Dec. 2009, Sander van der Leeuw put it thus: “we just have one crisis, which is that our current information processing capacity is insufficient to deal with the dynamics that surround us” (quoted by Giles Foden in an unpublished manuscript 'Narratives, metaphors and tipping points').

7 Sander van der Leeuw, again: “When, with our perspective of reduced dimensionality, we start acting, we change the world in a much higher dimensional space than what we actually have in our own minds, so we actually increase the number of unintended consequences of our action” (Ibid.).

8 Epistemology here means the ways in which we know the world, i.e. what is accepted as valid knowledge, and hence, what shapes our worldviews and decisions.

9 Ontology implies what exists, or 'the furniture of the world'. As new knowledge about the world is acquired (for example that we a part of fragile social-ecological systems) new modes of being, or ontologies, can emerge (for example socio-technical developments based on the precautionary principle).