Changing Consumer Behavior and Lifestyle as- a Challenge for Sustainable Consumption: a Theoretical Policy Perspective

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Abstract—*In 1992, Agenda 21 called for "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). It paved the way for the emerging understanding that the sustainability challenge cannot be solved only by improving efficiency, but should also include behavioral changes that entail empowerment of individuals and a concerted action of all societal actors, including NGO, governments, businesses, education and media, which already effectively shape lifestyles. It requires changes at economic, social, cultural and environmental levels by using strategies that raise awareness and develop new visions and values for sustainable societies.*

Index Terms— Changing consumer behavior Sustainable consumption, Sustainable developpement, Environmental Education, Sustainable lifestyle, theoretical policy perspective, sustainable production.

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade or so, there has been a wealth of natural and social scientific debate about the ecological consequences of contemporary consumption and there is, by now, something of a consensus. It is clear that lifestyles will have to change if there is to be any chance of averting the long-term impact of global warming, resource depletion, the loss of biodiversity, the production of destruction of valued 'natural' environments and waste or the pollution. To put Brundtland's famous definition another way round, future generations will encounter a much-degraded world if present trends continue. Apparent agreement on this angle disguises important theoretical divisions regarding the conceptualisation of behaviour, consumption and lifestyle. Are 'lifestyles' in certain sense 'chosen' or are they better looked as 'ways of life', that is, as part of the social fabric. What is the relation between 'behaviour' - what people do - and what they think? Is consumption an expression of taste, or a moment in a complex system of material, social and cultural reproduction? The task of sifting through these differences is of more than academic interest (Harrison and Davies 1998).

"Sustainable lifestyles are patterns of action and consumption, used by people to affiliate and differentiate themselves from others, which: meet basic needs, provide a better quality of life, minimise the use of natural resources and emissions of waste and pollutants over the lifecycle, and do not jeopardise the needs of future generations" (Centre for Sustainable Development, University of Westminste, 2004). Sustainable lifestyles should reflect specific economic, social, cultural and natural, heritage of each society. Sustainable consumption is related to the process of buying, disposing and consuming of goods, while sustainable lifestyles comprise a broader set of values and activities, such as interactions and education, which include, but are not limited to material consumption.

As it is suggest below, policies designed for promoting sustainable consumption are generally founded upon an extraordinarily narrow understanding of human behaviour. It is not too difficult to explain why this might be so, after all, certain theoretical positions are much more amenable to policy-making than others.

2 SUSTAINABLE CONSUPMTION/ SOFTWARE AND HARDWARE APPROACHES

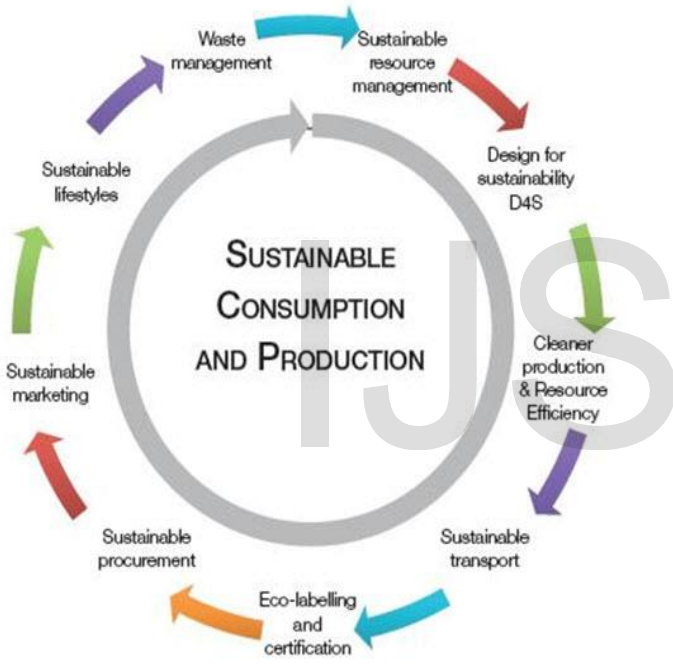
Sustainable consumption is the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life-cycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations (European Environment Agency definition).

New sustainable consumption activities and practices and lifestyles require integration of the ongoing efforts to consume efficiently with initiatives that shape consumer choices, expectations and demands towards more sustainable preferences ad lifestyles. This includes changes in the consumers' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours - societal "hardware" (all the material basis of society: the infrastructure, technology, products and services, as well as regulatory and economic frameworks that enable or constrain consumer choice) and in the societal "software" (all the non-material values and norms, institutions and cultures that govern our society in an informal way).

Addressing only hardware, through for example eco-efficiency developments, may lead, as been already proven in many areas, to rebound influence from increasing consumption levels and changed consumer behaviour. Alternatively, merely providing information to consumers is not sufficient in

absence of enabling infrastructure and goods. For example, encouraging people to reduce their car dependency without providing high quality convenient alternatives (delivery services, public transport, good bicycle paths, car sharing and rental services, etc.) will not yield the desired result. The new societal hardware and software should engage encourage, enable and exemplify more sustainable ways of living and herewith facilitate the shift towards more sustainable lifestyles. Only then will everyone feel the ownership of the more and better sustainable world.

FIGURE 1:
SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION



3. SUSTAINABCURRENT STATUS OF CONSUMPTION AND LIFESTYLE

There are many ways in which one might classify the literature on sustainable consumption. The strategy I have chosen distinguishes between positions that view consumers as **(1)** decision-makers exercising sustainable choice, **(2)** as citizens influencing the range of sustainable options on offer, or **(3)** as practitioners involved in reproducing variously resource intensive ways of life. These are not watertight categories nor are they all mutually exclusive.

2.1 Consumers as decision-makers: exercising environmental choice

According to the authors of a UK government report entitled Sustainable Development: Opportunities for Change 'consumers can have a huge influence on sustainable development through their impact as buyers. But they need help to make choices' (DETR 1998) Observations of this kind have prompted study into the psychological and economic determinants of consumer decision-making in order to figure out how to persuade people 'to change their behaviour' (Ekins 2003). Put more broadly, the aim of a current UK Economic and Social Research Council funded programme on 'Environment and Human Behaviour' is to discover why 'people behave as they do towards the environment' and to determine the 'factors that drive or affect human behaviour' (Ekins 2003).

Such formulations of 'the problem' have three related features in common. Firstly, they suppose individual behaviour to be responsive, hence the search for economic, psychological or social stimuli with which to trigger desired outcomes. Secondly, they imply a method of enquiry that revolves around the isolation and analysis of relevant 'factors'. Finally, they assume that human behaviour can be modified by restructuring the flow of information and incentives, or through education (Ekins 2003). Approaches of this kind pay scant attention to the formulation of options from which consumers 'choose', they do not recognise consumption to be a shared, collective or cultural enterprise, and they take little account of the multiple situations and contexts in which it takes place.

People are primarily addressed as autonomous 'shoppers' whose choices, in the aggregate, determine the fate and future of the planet. Brown and Cameron justify a 'focus primarily on individual behavior because policies and programs aimed at reducing consumption ultimately must alter the consumption decisions made by individuals'. This makes some sense. It is, after all, true that much ecological damage could be avoided if we all made 'green' our brand of choice: if we all opted for the most efficient washing machine possible, for locally produced food or for public rather than private transport. In following this line of argument, commentators have been drawn into a maze of motivational economics and psychology in which consumers' actions are explained with reference to a cocktail of competing concepts like those of status seeking, altruism, identity and rational calculation. While 'the consumer' is credited with considerable power, such analyses usually preserve a place for what Packard referred to as the 'hidden persuaders' (Packard 1957).

The notion that advertisers and commercial organisations have managed to convince people to consume more lends weight to the view that similar techniques might be used to turn evidently fickle desires in other ways. On the other hand, and as advocates of ecological education are quick to point out, deeper values may be at stake. Brown and Cameron, amongst others, argue that the extent to which promotional efforts succeed, and the degree to which people are willing to 'curb their consumption levels for the greater good of the community' depends upon the existence or otherwise of an underlying bedrock of ecological commitment.

The tacit assumption that consumers' decisions reflect their core beliefs has two consequences. One is to justify efforts to challenge the prevailing ethos of consumerism, individualism, and the construction of 'false' needs. These take more and less radical forms. Reisch is, for example, of the view that necessary 'changes in deeply rooted lifestyles' and values will only occur when and if 'people become enlightened consumers

who learn to identify those goods whose consumption adds little or nothing to welfare' (Reisch 2001).

Although beliefs are expected to translate into action, they do not always do so. This apparently puzzling discrepancy has prompted further research into competing value systems and needs and into the financial, informational or institutional, 'barriers' that prevent people from being as 'green' as they say they want to be. Although they may be swayed by other considerations, the ability to compare the 'true' environmental costs of different courses of action is, it looks, a necessary first step if consumers are to reduce the size of their ecological footprint (Wackernagel and Rees 1995).

2.2 Consumers as citizens: influencing the environmental options offer

The approaches represented here varies in that consumers figure as the instigators of, not the obstacles to, ecological reform. Assuming that environmental concerns are in fact diffused through society, writers like Spaargaren and van Vliet search for examples of bottom up 'ecological innovation …initiated by the wish of the consumer' (2000). The notion that motivated citizens will seek to reduce the resource intensity of production is an important, even necessary, part of environmental modernisation theory. Arguments of this sort are usually illustrated with reference to selective case researches of grass roots greening.

Taking such an approach, Georg (1999) describes three 'citizen initiatives for "social management of ecological change"'. These cases are used to show how small groups of citizens attempt to 'develop technologies and create social structures that can reduce the ecological degradation associated with the Western way of life' (1999). In the context of this discussion, the key point is that consumers are involved in developing alternative modes of provision and in reproducing new routines associated with them. They have a hand in shaping options as well as exercising choice between them and as van Vliet puts it, 'they participate in the structures of production-consumption cycles' (van Vliet 2002).

Proponents of environmental modernisation theory argue that capitalist society can be restructured around ecological goals and that with new technologies and forms of organisation in place, products and services can be delivered sustainably. This is a specifically attractive message in that there is no hint of restraint, no 'cutting back', and no questioning of contemporary conventions and ways of life. Instead, the challenge is to 'internalise' ecological position and considerations 'environmental rationality as a key variable in social decision-making'. This second cluster of ideas shares a number of distinctive features. Most obviously, there is more to consumption than shopping, hence Spaargaren's recommendation that policy ought 'not limit itself to consumer behaviour 'on the market' but should also be directed at intermediary systems and organizations which can have a direct affect on changes in household consumption patterns' (1997). Put another way, consumers are implicated in what is produced and how. Second, it seems that the 'rules of the game', including the rules of consumption, are formulated within social groups. Unlike the first position, this approach acknowledges the historical and cultural construction of preference and choice.

On the other hand, both assume that values drive behaviour and that it is necessary to make the ecological consequences of various courses of action visible and explicit. In both there is an implicit emphasis on resources rather than services, the difference being that this second approach expects ecological innovation to be a 'bottom up' process, perhaps involving the development of new, systems of provision. For policy, the challenge is not one of 'top down' persuasion but of helping consumers find environmentally rational ways of achieving the taken for granted goals of daily life.

2.3 Consumers as practitioners: reproducing more and lesse sustainable ways of life

The third family of ideas revolves around the proposition that patterns of consumption follow from the routine accomplishment of what people take to be 'normal' ways of life. As Ropke puts it, 'consumption is woven into everyday life' (Ropke 1999) and must be analysed as such. Those who concentrate on the specification and re-definition of 'normality', rather than on consumption per se, have various accounts of how practices are organised and of the relation between structure and agency. While Cogoy concludes that 'consumption' has much to do with the way in which individuals organize their lives', he also observes that 'The fact that most consumers consider spatial mobility or a holiday trip as important contributions to the enjoyment of their lives is not a law of nature, but a cultural phenomenon'. In this analysis, peoples' routines and expectations reflect systems of social and cultural order. Taking a stronger line, Reisch argues that 'the non-stop society forces consumers to adopt lifestyles which are unsustainable' (2001).

The idea that people are obliged to consume in order to be part of society raises a host of further issues about the relation between consumption and the production and reproduction of social difference, and about how the symbolic significance of specific forms of consumption evolves. These dynamics are important in explaining how concepts of well-being and the 'good life' take the form they do, how are they institutionalised, and with what ecological consequence. They are also important in defining what Redclift refers to as the 'underlying social commitments which drive our consumption, and contribute to waste' (1996).

As Redclift observes, normal and acceptable standards, ways of life are rarely articulated or questioned either in social ecological policy or in theory. As a result, contemporary formulations are 'afforded value by being naturalised. Their value is not interrogated' (1996). By bringing these issues back into the limelight, he clears the way for a much more challenging interpretation of what ecological policy should and could involve. Such a move foregrounds politically contentious issues about the assumptions and conventions around which society is organised. Redclift uses the example of automobility to illustrate his point: 'the right to individual motorised mobility is', he writes, 'enshrined in the way we regard the motor car. Challenging this commitment may mean redefining the relationship between where we live and work. It will require an altogether more radical way of "managing" the environ-

ment'. Echoing such an approach, Cogoy also concludes that 'ecological policies are unlikely to be successful if they do not address the issue of control and power distribution over time in contemporary society' (1999).

Though sometimes useful, the distinction between efficiency and sufficiency introduces further issues about the linkage between consumption, technology and demand. The idea that new technologies might increase resource efficiencies to such an extent that present patterns of consumption become sustainable requires a conceptual separation between means and ends in a way that is itself problematic.

Turning to a various body of literature, there is some support for the view that technological change is important not (only) because of the resource efficiencies that it might promise, but because tools and infrastructures shape taken for ways of life, granted conventions and practices. Rip and Kemp introduce the notion of a 'regime' to describe how 'technical groups and their social environments create stabilized interdependencies that shape further action (1998).

As they define it, regime change involves the reconfiguration of a 'seamless web' of social, technological and organisational elements. There are two observations to draw from this. Firstly, and as Rip and Kemp explain, 'the idea of a seamless web … implies that the evolution of technology and the evolution of society cannot be separated, and should be thought of in terms of coevolution' (1998). Technological 'fixes' to ecological problems are themselves infused with concepts of normal and sufficient practice. Secondly, and more important, these ideas suggest that patterns of sustainable consumption require and depend upon the development of correspondingly sustainable sociotechnical regimes.

Insights and lessons derived from historical studies of the sociotechnical co-evolution of telecommunications and electric power, are clearly relevant for those wanting to engender comparably wide ranging transitions toward sustainability. Geels (2002), Elzen (2002) and others have taken up the challenge of showing how 'transition theory' might be applied and of figuring out what policy makers might do to foster the development of sociotechnical regimes that have less ecologically damaging consequences than those of today.

In practical terms, this means identifying critical moments or turning points at which sociotechnical trajectories might be nudged, if not 'steered' in another orientation. It means looking for opportunities to modulate pathways of transition through considered forms of strategic intervention and it means facilitating interaction between the actors involved in configuring institutions, services and sectors. Strategies of this kind need not announce themselves as explicitly 'ecological' nor is there any need for consumers and practitioners to 'see' the environment in what they do. It is not a matter of persuading people to change their behaviour, one by one. The challenge is instead one of configuring sociotechnical systems such that the ecological burden of 'normal' practice is less.

TABLE 1
THE THREE POSITIONS COMPARED

	Conditions of sustainable consumption	**Representation of consumers and consumption**
Consumers as citizens: influencing the sustainable options on offer	Ecologically committed citizens will be actively involved in shaping the options on offer and in formulating new or modified institutions and modes of provision.	Recognise that consumers' choices are structured and that as citizens they have a hand in determining options on offer.
Consumers as practitioners: reproducing more and less sustainable ways of life	The reconfiguration of normal practice and the social, symbolic and technical co-evolution of taken-forgranted routines, habits, and expectations of everyday life.	Consumption is viewed as consequence of practice and analysed as such.
Consumers as decision-makers: exercising sustainable choice	Consumers decide to make 'green' their brand of choice. They do so because of new forms of ecological - economic valuation, and/or new interpretations of symbolic significance.	Consumers are viewed as autonomous decision-makers motivated by 'rational' economic or psychological (symbolic or positional) 'factors'.

TABLE 2
THE THREE POSITIONS COMPARED

	Relevant forms of policy intervention	**Appropriate measures of sustainable consumption**
Consumers as citizens: influencing the sustainable options on offer	Develop and promote more efficient products and technologies. Respond to consumer pressure to develop new institutional forms through which to fulfil existing 'needs'.	Ecological footprints and other measures of per-capita consumption together with an assessment of the ecological modernisation of infrastructures, systems and modes of provision.
Consumers as practitioners: reproducing more and less sustainable ways of life	Influencing understandings of normal practice, perhaps by 'steering' sociotechnical systems in transition, promoting diversity or trying to foster sociotechnical configurations that work.	The specification of normal standards, conventions and expectations of service and the character of entire (sociotechnical) systems of provision.
Consumers as decision-makers: exercising sustainable choice	Develop and promote more resource efficient products and technologies. Persuade consumers to adopt them by means of information, advice and price.	Ecological footprints and other measures of per-capita consumption.

2. SUSTAINABCURRENT STATUS OF CONSUMPTION AND LIFESTYLE

Lifestyles are group specific forms of how individuals live and interpret their lives in a social context. Lifestyle study needs a double perspective/methodology: observer and participant. We live our lives, and others observe it (by the way: other social actors, not only scientists), but we need to make sense of our actions and frame them in a more or less personally interpreted (sub-) cultural framework. Macro-data and

micro-motives should thus be monitored together. Current consumption patterns of lifestyles have been formed in centuries by our civilization and are driven by economic forces, political settings, environmental issues, technological progress, sociological and cultural contexts and psychological determinants (Figure 1).

Economic development leads to improved productivity that leads to reduced goods prices. Incomes also increase, as well as purchasing power of individuals. Ideally, higher income together with the right information could lead to more sustainable buying choices.

Technological advances lead to supply of more efficient goods and technologies. They may, however, create new visions for lifestyles or conditions, which could stimulate people to adapt more resource intensive lifestyles.

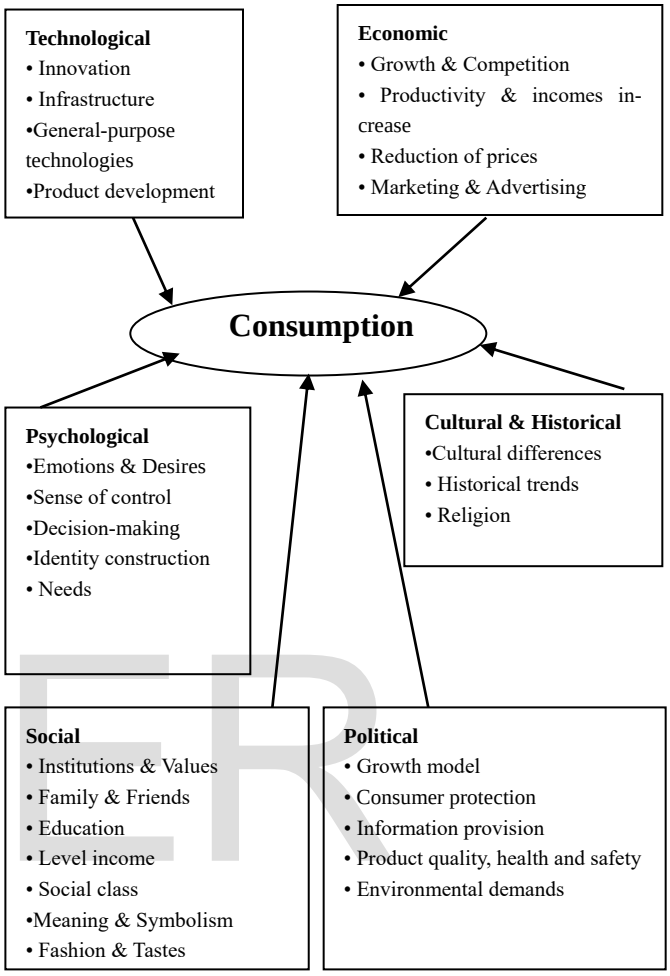
Policy actions influence lifestyles through regulatory tools, e.g. bans and rules; information provision, e.g. eco-labels, or fiscal measure, e.g. taxes, affecting practices of all actors. Despite some improvements, there are still many policy actions that send confusing signals to markets and consumers.

Personal Factors A consumer's age, occupation, income, lifestyle and phase in life affects his buying behavior and the market as well. Most people tend to change their buying behaviors and tastes throughout their lifetimes. Specific items are important to one demographic but not to another.

Psychological factors influence the consumer market in many ways because a person's motivations, beliefs, attitudes and perceptions shape his purchasing behaviors. Socio-psychological drivers include personal motives and affects of the social environment. People buy products and services for their functions and qualities, as much as for their symbolic value that serves as a marker of social status. Material possessions are perceived as a measure of success, happiness and power, post-material values are also emerging. Some researches indicate that the link with happiness holds true only until certain income level, after which it de-links from economic welfare and instead other factors such as, possibility to enjoy family and friends and availability of time define our quality of life.

Historical and cultural and aspects also influence lifestyles and unspoken codes of conduct in each society. Understanding the underlying historical and cultural settings of each social group is important for realising how the lifestyles and visions can be changed, but still remain grounded on and embedded into social and cultural context.

FIGURE 1:
DRIVERS FOR CONSUMPTION PATTERNS AND LIFESTYLES



4. Approaches and best practices towards sustainable lifestyles

In the perspective to make sustainable lifestyles an easy choice, all stakeholders need to facilitate the integration of "sustainability" into existing value and socio-economic structures.

Policy actions for sustainable lifestyles

Public authorities at all levels can facilitate the change towards sustainable lifestyles by enabling and supporting the development of a new vision for sustainable societies and by setting the economic, regulatory and institutional frameworks that enable and encourage sustainable lifestyles. In many countries, policies have

already been developed for greening the market by setting ecological demands on goods design, use or final disposal. In the EU such policies stimulate ecological innovation in businesses, create market for environmentally sound goods and consumer demand.

planning and land-use policies can enable and stimulate the development of more sustainable lifestyles. Construction

policies and governmental subsidies for sustainable housing, e.g. construction of passive houses or use of solar panels, are promising policy tools that help "normalise" new behaviours. Once infrastructure is in place, it becomes easier for consumers to change their habits.

Traditional economic instruments supporting sustainable lifestyles, such as taxes and charges, can be effective if combined with measures that ensure provision of alternatives. Education, communication tools and marketing sustainable consumption and lifestyles is a paramount task for governments and international initiatives.

Business actions towards sustainable lifestyles Businesses have an important role to play in providing hardware and software for sustainable lifestyles by designing goods, and by shaping choices through advertising. Business strategies of eco-efficiency are well suited for reducing environmental impacts of goods. It is important to create markets for sustainable goods through direct education, media, and eco-labelling; businesses could take a more proactive stance in supporting sustainable lifestyles, thereby developing and securing future markets and profits. Communicating ecological and social information to consumers proves to be a smart business strategy for developing new markets. Some firms provide life cycle environmental and financial information to stimulate buy of their green goods.

Individual's actions towards sustainable lifestyles In their role as consumers people can greatly influence the sustainability of their lifestyles by preferring more sustainable goods. And there are already clear signs that the market for ecologically sound products is growing. Specific examples of such initiatives include common practices of renting out cottages to several people Co-housing communities, eco-villages and creative communities have all similar goal – to respond to the basic needs of today's households and provide childcare, economic efficiency and social contact by combining the autonomy of private dwellings with the advantages of community living.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

How to create, mainstream and promote desirable visions of more sustainable living for various regions/countries and for different cultural contexts? This issue remains one of the main challenges. It will be important, for example, to investigate what representations of traditional and global lifestyles people in developing economies have and how images of more sustainable lifestyles can be built on historical, natural, cultural and social heritage of different countries.

Another challenge is how to promote and support innovation for sustainable lifestyles by governments and businesses. Strategies for enabling infrastructures require governmental policies, public-private partnerships and business initiatives. It is vital to understand how technology can help create new models of sustainable lifestyles and how business can use its communication power to deliver another vision of society, improving quality of life and not only at increasing consumerism.

Perhaps the most profound challenge is how public authorities can strengthen and support bottom-up initiatives. Here combination of the hardware and the software is clearly needed, as well as collaboration and support of NGOs, education institutions and communities.

The overarching challenge regards the role of education and communication in promoting and supporting and normalising visions of sustainable lifestyles. In this angle, it is fundamental that SCP ideas are introduced from pre-school to university education programmes, but professional and vocational training. For that the social capital – the awareness of the critical mass of people and the capacity for change can be created.

A main challenge is that the right for more sustainable lifestyles and access to education for sustainable consumption should become a universal right. For that reason, development of more sustainable societies should include developing innovative solutions and policy measures for less affluent parts of the world population and devising visions of lifestyles for "non-consumer" class.

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