SustEcon Conference Proceedings

Sustainable Consumption and Lifestyles and the Role of Small Scale Initiatives

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Background information

The international conference „**SustEcon Conference – The contribution of a sustainable economy to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals**" took place on **25 and 26 September 2017** at the Freie Universität in Berlin, Germany (organised by the NaWiKo project).

The focus of the conference was on the contributions of the sustainable economy to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This contribution can be observed on a number of different levels: Innovations toward achieving the SDGs are to be as much a topic at the conference as methodological questions about measuring sustainability. In addition to that, the differences between various discourses and concepts and their respective contributions to the sustainable economy were also featured prominently in the conference. A further topic of interest was the (political) framework conditions and barriers to a sustainable economy as well as the contribution of science to the SDGs.

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1.   Introduction: the need for social and economic change beyond consumerism

National economies in a growing number of countries – and by extension, social and political peace – are profoundly dependent on private consumption and on growth. In the so-called developed countries private consumption accounts for 60-70% of GDP; in the USA it is approximately 70% of GDP[1]. Climate change and other ecological challenges require a steep decrease in GHG emissions and energy consumption as well as the throughput of minerals, ores and other materials. This is expressed in the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda which includes the Sustainable Development Goal 12: "Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns"[2]. It is hard to imagine how such steep reductions could be achieved without addressing unsustainable lifestyles and their drivers in the industrialized countries. In addition, the moral imperative of equity as visualized in the "Oxfam Doughnut" requires that less developed countries and poor developed countries are allowed to grow their economies and attendant consumption in order to reach minimum levels of decent living[3].

Numerous studies have shown that directly appealing to final consumers to reduce their consumption habits and practices are ineffective[4]. This is because people's lifestyles and daily practices are deeply embedded in the complex system we refer to as consumer society. Consumer society comprises culture, the economic system, institutions, business models and infrastructures, all calibrated to maximize consumption and to erect barriers to less consuming lifestyles. In order to implement the SDG #12 we thus need a major systemic change: a different economy and a change in key institutions, dominant cultures and social practices[5]. The aim is a social organization in which consumerism would play a significantly diminished role in people's lives, a production sector that would be focused more on services and public goods and less on consumer goods, and the deployment of technological innovations toward advancing less, rather than more, consumption.

This paper explores how small-scale initiatives might foster such social change. We first discuss the concepts sustainable consumption and sustainable lifestyles, before moving to small-scale initiatives as change agents through higher order learning as well as their broader contexts. We next reflect on windows of opportunity; and finally discuss the role of communication and education.

2.   What is sustainable consumption?

Sustainable consumption first emerged as a concept in the political discourse after the UN Conference on Environment and Development, in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. A first and widely quoted definition from the Oslo Symposium of 1994 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"*[6]. This definition emphasizes consumption as meeting basic needs but does not address consumption as a lifestyle choice of more affluent people and societies.

Since the 1990s a considerable amount of research has been conducted on understanding consumption and lifestyles. The initial understanding of consumption as individual choice-making – and therefore calling for frugality[7], voluntary simplicity[8] and sufficiency[9] -- has been replaced with a much more systemic and complex picture. People consume in order to satisfy such basic material needs as shelter, mobility, clothing and food; but also to satisfy immaterial needs in a search for a meaningful life, self-realization, status, belonging, and security[10]. As first described by Beaudrillard[11] and Bourdieu[12], many consumer goods signal status, power, success and identity. Peer pressure is an important driver of consumption. For these reasons explorations of human well-being and happiness have become part of sustainable consumption research. Max-Neef made an important distinction between (material and immaterial) human needs and ways to satisfy them, which he calls satisfiers. Human needs are universal, but satisfiers are culturally determined and can, at least in principle, be influenced[13]. For instance, mobility is a basic human need, but the private car is a satisfier, not only for transportation, but also for status, independence and "freedom". Research into possibilities to fulfill needs with less material goods through services or through various forms of sharing have also become part of the sustainable consumption research field[14],[15].

A transition to sustainable consumption and lifestyles presents a very difficult challenge. First, in consumer society the prevailing business models, political priorities and dominant culture all work in tandem to encourage more consumption. Macro level forces, such as global trade, the monetary system, and the debt-driven need for economic growth in a capitalist economy also translate in practice to fostering more consumerist lifestyles[16]. Second, there is the lock-in phenomenon. People find themselves locked-in into unsustainable lifestyles for reasons beyond their control. For instance, in the US a search for affordable housing usually leads to increasingly distant suburbs; suburban lifestyles and inadequate public transport lead to car-dependency; and the housing stock in more affluent communities (which in the US signify better schools) favors large dwellings and other high-footprint consumption practices; and so on.

This complex nature of consumption is recognized in a definition of sustainable lifestyles provided in a recent report by the United Nations Environment on fostering and communicating sustainable lifestyles: *"A sustainable lifestyle minimizes ecological impacts while enabling a flourishing life for individuals, households, communities, and beyond. It is the product of individual and collective decisions about aspirations and about satisfying needs and adopting practices, which are in turn conditioned, facilitated, and constrained by societal norms, political institutions, public policies, infrastructures, markets, and culture"* [17].

Governments have so far been very reluctant to explicitly address people's life styles beyond issues of public health; and to recognize the systemic nature of unsustainable consumption. Policies aimed at changing consumption patterns and reducing consumption have instead emphasized providing product information and product labeling for final consumers, developing

eco-design guidelines for producers, and educating and "nudging" consumers to buy the right products and to conserve energy[18]. Not surprising, these policies have had limited success in reducing the overall carbon footprint of individuals and communities and often amounted to separating waste, recycling, replacing plastic shopping bags and purchasing (more of) energy efficient products. More successful to date have been sustainable government procurement policies and requiring the industry to develop energy standards for products, though the latter has been partially undermined in practice by rebound effects[19].

Policy makers generally consider economic growth more important than sustainability while business strategies do not go beyond corporate social responsibility and, more recently, the circular economy and life cycle assessment[20]. Even most environmental NGOs are not taking up sustainable consumption as part of their agenda. Organizations that focus on sustainable consumption research and practices are small and underfunded[21],[22].

3.   Small-scale initiatives as change agents

In recent years small-scale initiatives as possible agents of change toward sustainability have gotten a lot of attention among researchers and practitioners. These have been described under many different names, such as grassroots innovations[23], Bounded Socio-technical Experiments[24]; the non-commercial sharing economy, social innovations[25], and experiments in socio-technical niches[26]. What they have in common is that they explore - on a small scale - alternatives for present systems of provision and needs fulfilment. Examples are urban agriculture, slow food, community-owned power generation, ride sharing and other platform economy exchanges, co-housing, eco-villages, local currencies and credit unions, to name a few. These small-scale initiatives are often local and driven by individuals and small groups who share a vision of a sustainable future; and acknowledge that change begins at the local level and that they need to explore and exploit "interstitial spaces in the current system", to use the term introduced by Eric Olin Wright[27].

The questions often asked with regard to successful small-scale initiatives is: how to replicate them; and how to scale them up?[28]. Our response to this challenge is that instead of aiming for replication and upscaling we should instead ask: how to identify, preserve and diffuse the higher order learning that takes place in these initiatives? By higher order learning we mean reframing the problem definition and changing the interpretive frame among the diverse participants in an initiative. In an earlier paper we defined higher order learning in an interactive project as *"……participants re-examine, and possibly change, their initial perspectives on the societal needs and wants … as well as the approaches and solutions; examine and place the particular project in a broader context of pursuing a sustainable society; examine, and possibly change, their own perceived roles in the above problem definitions and solution; change views on the mutual relationships among each other relative to the specific project or the broader societal context, including mutual convergence of goals and problem definitions; change their preferences about the social order as well as beliefs about best strategies for achieving them."*[29]. Such reframing and reconceptualization may be conducive for translation into different contexts and different situations.

Another way to empower small scale initiatives as effective change agents is to give them *directionality* so that the diffusion of learning beyond the boundaries of each initiative will converge in a consistent and mutually reinforcing way. That necessitates that the proponents of

various initiatives to consistently keep in mind the broader context in which their projects operate. Four elements of this broader context are[30]:

a. **Macroeconomics:** As mentioned above national wealth as measured by GDP is largely created through private consumption. The price we pay for that is (1) ecologically unsustainable demand for energy and materials, and (2) lack of attention to the equity dimensions of this economic activity vis-a-vis the actual social needs and well-being. The questions are: Does the initiative contribute to the necessary shift toward an economy that is less dependent on consumption?

b. **Ideology**. The neoliberal ideology delegates the job of improving well-being of the people to the free market. In Karl Polanyi's words, it facilitated the disembedding the economy from society[31]. The price we pay for it is growing inequalities and the imperative for economic growth through consumption. An ideology that promotes a greater balance between the market and public policies has been widely discussed as one of the proposed solutions[32]. The question is: Does the initiative contribute to reframing the perspective on improving human well-being through means other than market fundamentalism?

c. **Culture:** Culture evolves together with the underlying economic structures and institutions in a particular historical and geographic context[33]. Take for example the cultural change that accompanied the rapid shift in the US, in the years following the WW II, from cities to suburbs, driven by the need to find new civilian markets for the enormously productive war-time industrial complex. The shift created a new cultural understanding of what good life is in a democratic and prosperous society built around consumerism and sprawl. The question is: Does the initiative contribute to a cultural shift toward an understanding of good life as less dependent on consumerism?

d. **Technological innovation:** When innovations in information technology gave rise to the so-called sharing economy, there was an intense interest in these new economic forms as potential social change agents. The optimists hoped for a change in the culture of consumption and social relations to more solidaristic and communal forms and for less material consumption. But the power of free market ideology and incumbent institutions resulted in "platform-capitalism' rather than "sharing economy". However, the more socially-oriented variants have not disappeared: Cooperatively owned car sharing services, tool libraries, Makers' Spaces are established niche activities, and bike sharing programs have been fabulously successful world-wide. The question is: How can the new technology be applied to fostering lifestyles of less consumption and consumerism?

4. Windows of opportunity

How to create the conditions under which diffusion of learning from small scale initiatives, hopefully designed and interpreted with directionality, could alter the mainstream? We need to recognize and take advantage of windows of opportunity. Erik Olin Wright argues that nurturing novel modes of social organization in the fractures of the dominant system, while not threatening the incumbent institutions and power relations, may provide the groundwork for future more radical social transformations by providing the vision, learning, and building social capital[34]. Similarly, the Multi-Level Perspective advocates that niche experiments may eventually destabilize incumbent socio-technical regimes (or systems of provision) especially if landscape factors (such as the threat of global climate change) become aligned with niche experiments (such as alternative energy collaboratives)[35].

What can provide such windows of opportunity? These could be either economic or natural calamities or could be intentionally created. The 2008 Great Recession provided an opportunity to change the financial and economic system, but that did not happen mostly because alternatives were not readily available; and existing power relationships vigorously opposed it. Other calamities will certainly happen because of economic unbalance, climate change and other ecological disasters, political instability, mass migration because of climate change and water scarcity, crises in food provision or public health, and through cyber failures. In our complex system there are unknown tipping points that may inadvertently be crossed, triggering crises.

Intentional windows of opportunity could be created by social movements against, for example, growing unemployment and underemployment. To draw again on Karl Polanyi, this would be a second movement emerging in response to the excesses of the first movement, namely, the free market. Or it may come from protests from millennials who are interested in urban life but are priced out of the gentrifying cities. Or it could come from a challenge to the industrial food production system from the public health sector fighting against obesity and diabetes, or from an acute health disaster, such as another mad-cow disease outbreak, or from the environmental advocates concerned about the food production's externalities. Or it could come from the economic interests which see financial opportunities in retrofitting the failing deep suburbs in the US or in bringing economic life into the declining post-industrial cities. Or it could come from technological innovations, such as self-driving cars, which might make suburban garages obsolete and might facilitate the re-examination of land-use policies.

5.   Communicating sustainable lifestyles

Communication and education have long been considered essential tools for systemic change towards sustainable lifestyles. However, the academic and conceptual language of sustainable consumption researchers and some practitioners has hampered effective communication and education. In a recent report commissioned by UN Environment, a different approach has been tried, taking successful experiments in sustainable living as case studies to learn how to frame and to communicate sustainable lifestyles[36].

In the report 16 lifestyle experiments and campaigns are described and analyzed. From the analysis and through literature research a 4-step strategic approach emerged based on eight principles that need to be observed in order to create a successful experiment. These principles are, summarized: *Engage in participatory, relevant, and grounded ways; Focus on aspirations; Set clear goals and demonstrate sustainability results; Consider the systemic nature of lifestyles; Take advantage of life stages and transitions; Accommodate the diversity in lifestyles; Show that lifestyles extend beyond individual action; Learn and adapt to changing conditions*. In the report these principles are grounded and illustrated by examples from the case studies. The case studies themselves show the principles in operation and show that application of most, if not all principles enables a successful experiment. In addition the case studies provide messages for communicating to a wider audience.

In one of the most interesting case studies Kislábnyom (small footprint) in Hungary, lower income households were involved in interactive activities aimed at promoting long-lasting and sustainable behavior change. The effort consisted of interactive training sessions with groups of families around the country, small footprint competitions for households, celebratory community events, planting of native fruit trees, and taking collective responsibility for emissions associated with

program-related events. The organizing NGO Green Dependent identified many behaviors that households were already taking that could be expanded on, and reframed how participants thought about the issue by promoting the idea that low income lifestyles are inherently sustainable. The effort created a feeling of pride among participants and reframing of their view on their frugal lifestyles green and ecologically sustainable. This is a *prime case of higher order learning* through a small-scale initiative.

This approach to communicating sustainable lifestyles through evaluating and promoting existing sustainable lifestyle practices needs to be further developed and tested, but it provides potentially a fruitful alternative to more traditional campaign for promoting sustainable consumption or life styles.

6. Conclusions

This paper began with a premise that sustainability cannot be achieved through new technological innovations alone; and that it additionally requires changes in consumption patterns. The complexity of consumer society is such that it requires multiple approaches in multiple domains, including government policies, changing business models, changes in infrastructure, and bottom-up initiatives. While the variety of small scale initiatives may seem at first glance not capable of effecting social change in this complex system, with directionality their power could be greatly increased. The most important gain from such small scale initiatives is the higher order learning they stimulate. Diffusion of learning is less difficult, and more conducive for social change, than orchestrated efforts toward upscaling and replicating. Deeply participatory communication campaigns that are based on the principles delineated in the UN Environment report can be effective facilitators of such diffusion of learning.

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