

Consumption and climate change

KLIMAT I FOKUS | Nr 11 • 2014 | LUND UNIVERSITY

SHOP



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Climate change mitigation and adaptation, while simultaneously allowing for economic development, improving the well-being of all people and ensuring social justice and equality and protecting ecosystems, seems to be the largest challenge in the history of mankind. So far, the efforts to address growing environmental and human problems through technological solutions and policy measures have been largely outpaced by growing population and increasing consumption. It is becoming increasingly clear that consumption – the demand for goods and services – needs attention alongside the production of goods and services. The current patterns and levels of consumption at all levels, by states (public procurement), businesses (private purchasing) and households, are unsustainable.

Housing, mobility, and food

Three domains of products are responsible for the majority of consumption-related environmental impacts. These domains together sum up to 75-80% of the life cycle environmental impacts in industrialised countries: housing (especially heating systems), transport (especially car use and air travel) and food and drink (especially meat and dairy). In order to pursue climate change mitigation, the environmental consequences of our daily purchasing choices and global consumption patterns need to be tackled. Understanding the essential driving forces of consumption is crucial in order to devise strategies for shifting the society towards more sustainable consumption patterns and levels, and ultimately sustainable lifestyles.

Economic drivers and policies to steer consumption

The idea of continuous economic growth being possible and desirable in the finite world is what underlines today's world's consumption trends. Striving for economic growth leads to market competition, productivity increases and to decreasing prices on products, which stimulates consumption. On the other hand, the tendency towards increasing incomes leads to a growing purchasing power of individuals, which,

stimulated by advertising industry also leads to increasing consumption. Prevailing economic and political institutions and policies make people believe that the pursuit of higher material prosperity and growth in terms of GDP is the expected behaviour or even a patriotic duty. Within this economic growth framework, consumption policies focus on protecting consumer sovereignty, on monitoring health and safety features of products, and providing consumer information, through eco-labelling and campaigns. The main sustainable consumption tools are of voluntary nature, whereas economic and regulatory policy instruments are used relatively seldom.

The role of technology in consumption

Technological advances drive consumption at several levels. On the one hand, technological improvements lead to design and provision of more efficient products and technologies. On the other hand, new technologies and products directly create new needs and stimulate consumption, and indirectly shape conditions that require people to consume more. For example the car, while increasing people's mobility and providing time savings, also led to increased distances travelled since people got the means to live a long way from their places of work, shopping malls and from their friends and family.

Consequently, entire infrastructures were built around car use and nowadays the car is so embedded into everyday life that people are locked into using it, especially outside cities. Existing policies have mostly focused on improving eco-efficiency of car design and shifting to alternative fuel use, for example electricity, ethanol, biodiesel or gas. However, there is a growing movement of social innovation and collaborative consumption, which devises alternative ways of using cars and capitalising on their idling capacity (an average European car is used for 30 minutes a day).

Thus, mitigation is most effective when it addresses both transport means and systems and how they are used by us and our behaviour. So while there are still many opportunities to improve car design by making them upgradable and much more long-lived than they are today, there is an almost untapped potential of making our car use more efficient and sufficient through car-sharing organisations, for example SunFleet, alternative taxi services, for example Uber, or sharing rides with neighbours, co-workers and strangers enabled by ICT solutions such as apps and internet portals, such as Samåkning or Skjutsgruppen.

What value do we put on consumption?

Changing consumption patterns and levels is a complex task, since people purchase goods and services for their specific qualities and direct functions, as well as for their symbolic or identity value. We use material goods in social conversations and in order to position ourselves in the social hierarchy. Much of the consumption is also habitual as people follow daily routines and practices without making deliberate choices all the time. The practices themselves are often shaped or conditioned by surrounding infrastructure and environments and by norms, values and cultures. So, it is important that infrastructures and institutions develop towards enabling sustainable lifestyles and not consumerism.

Whereas in our contemporary consumer cultures, material possessions are perceived as a measure of success and power

and as contributing to well-being, people also report that it is not only money that matters for them, but also access to education and health services, job and time to spend with the friends and family. At macro-level, increasing GDP contributes to increases in subjective well-being only until a certain point, after which the two indicators start to decouple. In order to meet the challenge of climate change, as well as other environmental and sustainable world challenges, it is important to have a broader definition of well-being, quality of life and wealth, which includes pro-social values such as resilient and equitable communities, health, education and personal development, peace and stability, environmental and social justice and other issues, which in a very tangible way matter for all of us and our well-being.



WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

Consumption patterns and levels of individuals and households greatly contribute to the society's climate and overall environmental impacts. Most of the environmental policies and measures have targeted eco-efficiency of production processes and product design. Existing consumption-targeting instruments, such as information provision and eco-labelling, rely on actions of individuals and thus need to be backed up by society-wide strategies for developing institutions and infrastructure that enable sustainable lifestyles. Action by governments is needed to lead the shift towards sustainable consumption and well-being, in concert with action by individuals and businesses.

ABOUT THE WRITER

OKSANA MONT is a professor in sustainable consumption and production and Director of PhD Programme at the IIIEE at Lund University. Her research interests lie at the cross-road of policy, economics and sociology of consumption. She leads projects on sustainable consumption and servicizing policies. The role of business and social innovation in shaping and promoting sustainable lifestyle is also in focus, as well as the role of ICT as enabler of more sustainable everyday life at work and at home.

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KLIMAT I FOKUS is a series of research briefs produced by Lund University Sustainability Forum. The purpose is to describe and explain current and central concepts in climate research. **SUSTAINABILITY FORUM** connects and supports climate-, energy- and sustainability research at Lund University, and provides a bridge between society and academia within these fields. Sustainability Forum was launched in January 2014 and is coordinated by CEC, Centre for Climate and Environmental Research.

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