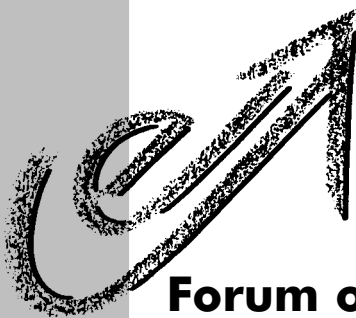


**German NGO Forum
on Environment & Development**

**Report to the 7th Meeting of the
Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD)**

Consumption and Sustainable Development



**Forum on
Environment & Development**

**Position paper
of the German NGO Forum on Environment & Development
on Consumption and Sustainable Development**

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*„There is enough to satisfy everyone's needs,
but not enough to satisfy everyone's greed“
(Mahatma Gandhi)*

1 INTRODUCTION

On a global scale, the use of energy and resources has increased. Private consumption plays a substantial role in this increase. As figures from the latest Human Development Report issued by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) show, private consumption comprised 24 billion dollars in 1998 which is twice as much as in 1975 and six times as much as in 1950. It seems to be that humankind is increasingly getting richer and materially better off.

But this wealth is not equally shared: Whilst the richest 20% of the world population (about 1.25 billion people) own 86% of all goods, the poorest 20% receive only a share of 1.1%. Accordingly, the richer people consume more of any good: 9 times the amount of fish and meat consumed by poor people, 15 times the amount of energy, they use 84% of paper and own 87% of all motor vehicles.

This inequality is not only found between industrialised and developing countries. Equally, in the so called rich nations, the disparity between rich and poor is increasing. Also here, people are suffering from hunger and homelessness - all in all about 100 million people.

Apart from the extreme social injustice which is taking place, it is now widely accepted, that the lifestyle of the rich nations which is based on a high level of consumption and therefore on massive energy and resource use, is not compatible with the aims of a future-oriented, sustainable way of development. As the consumption-related resource use has already reached the limits

of the carrying capacity of the ecological system, its expansion and further increase worldwide would surely result in an ecological collapse. Currently humankind uses 40% of all photosynthesis production. If this consumption level would be maintained, it would reach 80% by the year 2050.

Industrialised countries also use huge parts of agricultural land in developing countries to meet their consumption needs: for Germany this comprises 6.3 million hectares of land (150 000 hectares in Brazil alone to partially cover German orange juice consumption). Obviously, the environmental space is unequally distributed. And this inequality is partially responsible for making the lifestyle of the middle and upper classes in the western world possible.

However, people are fascinated by the lifestyle of the industrialised countries and all appeals not to pursue this kind of lifestyle in the developing world have been ignored. Considering that one billion people in these countries do not have enough to survive, including one third who have no access to clean water and one fifth who suffer from malnutrition, these proposals may sound quite cynical. Therefore, it is primarily the responsibility of the rich industrialised countries to change their life style and consumption patterns in order to:

- a) meet the principles of sustainability and
- b) to serve as an attractive example for developing countries (which does not exclude that a lot can be learned from developing countries).

2 WHAT IS A SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION PATTERN?

2.1. Improved and more efficient products and services

To ensure that consumers have the chance to consume sustainably, producers also have to take responsibility and should offer products and services

- that are produced with much less energy and raw materials (e.g. green products)
- that, when used, can function on a minimum of energy and resource input (e.g. energy-saving refrigerators, water-saving washing machines, cars that run on less petrol, solar-powered products etc.). The keyword here is eco-efficiency.
- which are produced without or with little emission of substances that are hazardous to the environment and which also emit as little as possible when used. The production and consumption of a product should not entail any dangers for humans or the ecological system.
- high-quality products i.e. they should be more durable, reusable, recyclable and repairable (reduction of flow of matter)
- products and services that are predominantly based on raw and supplementary materials and primary products within the region. A decentralised production structure reduces energy-intensive transport. In addition, regional production structures are more transparent as to whether the supplies are produced along the principles of sustainability.
- Products that are socially and culturally compatible, which includes export products of industrialised countries (e.g. the abandonment of genetically-manipulated seeds) but also of developing countries (fair traded coffee, products not made by child labour etc.)
- We also need new concepts of 'services' and 'use'. Not every need should be satisfied with the purchase of a good. A lot of things could be borrowed or bought in terms of a service (i.e. borrow instead of own). Examples are car-sharing and

energy-contracting. The keyword here is dematerialisation.

2.2 Concept for the future: quality of life instead of standard of life

2.2.1 Efficiency is not enough: Less is More!

Sustainable consumption means more conscious consumption which also means less consumption.

To achieve a sustainable consumption pattern it will not be sufficient to substitute one product for another, as the level of consumption in industrialised countries is generally too high. Here however, the act of consuming is often a substitution for something else. We often consume because of habit, boredom, loneliness, grief and try to compensate for stress, lack of time, demands we cannot meet, and fears. We consume to partake in the competition for status and acknowledgement within our society. This includes big cars, a constantly-changing fashion in clothes, expensive apartments, extravagant leisure activities and holidays in exotic places. Although it is only a minority within the rich countries who can afford to live this extensive lifestyle, it nevertheless exerts a huge fascination on the less-wealthy and serves as a measure for many people.

A sustainable style of life and consumption is also connected to the quest for a better life. Therefore, the plea to the people of rich countries to reduce their standard of consumption due to social and ecological reasons, does not necessarily result in painful renunciation. It is rather a chance to gain a certain life-quality, as standard of life is not the same as quality of life. Instead of the so far dominant ideology of 'more and faster', sustainable consumption orients itself along the lines of 'less and slower, but better and

more beautiful'.

Sustainable consumption demands a discussion about and the questioning of the so far valid value model and the model of welfare.

A strategy for sustainable consumption which is based on the call for renunciation will fail. A successful impact on consumers will only be achieved, when the strategy promotes the vision of a better, more happy because more enjoyable, life.

2.2.2 Common use of resources

Sustainable consumption demands the willingness to entail in new forms of product use in a lot of areas. The flow of matter will be reduced and the duration of the use prolonged. This can be achieved through pool-solutions, where rarely-used goods are bought or borrowed communally (examples are motor vehicles, tools, holiday houses, sport equipment etc.). An old but still expandable area for common use is (regional) public transport.

On the other hand, consumers could transfer their unwanted goods onto others who could still use them (second-hand shops, jumble-sales, local exchange trading systems, Internet trading-forum etc.). Recently, such models have also gained importance in the economic world: there are approaches to communal transport of goods (city-logistics) or leasing models.

2.2.3 Subsistence or high tech self provision

Apart from efficiency and sufficiency subsistence or self provision are being discussed as further possible strategies. Self provision comprises the production of goods for one's own needs on the current high technological level.

3 OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

3.1 Waste separation is not sexy

There are several facts, which hinder sustainable consumption behaviour.

Obstacles for consumers:

- Citizens are actors as well as victims. Many point out that the overall framework has to be changed, before they can act themselves; this is an opinion shared throughout society.
- Lifestyles in industrialised countries have become more differentiated. However, for great parts of the population hedonism (strive for enjoyment), mobility and self-fulfilment are the core values in their attitude towards life. Ecologically-conscious behaviour often remains to be perceived as hindering in this respect.
- Many people experience a fear of the future and do not expect that we will be able to solve the global problems. Yet, they are happy about their current lives. Problems are being pushed away or people simply resign.
- Ecological alternatives are often more expensive than conventional products / services. Without any additional use value, consumers often refrain from paying a higher price. This is also part of a certain value system: social or ecological aspects are not yet perceived as being part of the quality of a product.
- Lifestyle and consumer behaviour are issues related to social prestige. There still is a negative social image attached to ecologically-conscious behaviour e.g. using public transport, taking a holiday within the region rather than on the Caribbean islands etc.
- Existing examples of sustainable consumption often only function when many people partake (e.g. car-sharing). People want to make sure that they are not the only ones who try the new option. They often lack the confidence to do so.
- The central point remains personal well-being. In our lives, we search for pleasure, satisfaction, happiness. Is this part of what is currently perceived as an ecologically-conscious daily behaviour?

„Fun whilst turning down the central heating, feelings of happiness when using public transport, excitement when shopping goods without package, feelings of lust when binning paper in the recycling-box?“ (Udo Kuckarzt)

3.2 Distorted prices, no objectives

Obstacles for the economy

- A substantial obstacle to economic actors to offer ecologically-benign products on the market are policies concerned with taxation and subsidisation. Currently, the use of the environment is taxed too little and human labour too much, and environmentally-destructive behaviour is even being promoted.
- In addition, most industrialised states have not yet formulated a strategy for sustainability which is based on clear aims and time frames and which could serve as a means for orientation for economic actors.

3.3 Diversity of lifestyles - diversity of instruments

In spite of these obstacles, there is a great chance that a sustainable lifestyle will be achieved. So far, already 20-25% of the German population are considered to be 'post-materialists'. They consume consciously due to ethical, moral, ecological or philosophical convictions. (By the way, only a third of these belong to the educated 'class'; against common assumptions, these are not just 'elite-consumers' who have become modest because they already own everything or because they can afford it).

To reach the majority of people however, instruments have to be as manifold as there are obstacles.

- we need economic incentives and prices which reflect the social and ecological truth for those people, who can only be motivated to change their behaviour, when prices affect their spending
- we need commandments and prohibitions for those producers, who in spite of the

recent insights still use hazardous materials or violate human rights (e.g. child labour)

- we are clearly in need of more and precise information about products for those consumers, who not only make a choice based on the price of a product
- we need a comprehensive, society-based discussion about values

3.4 Appealing social & ecological innovations

The success will depend on whether we achieve to propagate a sustainable lifestyle to such an extent, that great parts of the population will be addressed emotionally. Sustainable consumption needs to get rid of the image of being uncomfortable, old-fashioned, restrained and costly. The existing examples of socio-ecological innovations are therefore extremely important, as they show that a sustainable lifestyle is not only possible, but also attractive, fun and enjoyable (examples are car-free, ecologically-built settlements; local exchange trading systems; regional production and marketing structures; socially and ecologically sustainable leisure and holiday activities; trendy 'ecological' clothes). We need more of such initiatives and projects and they should be communicated more intensively.

4 A CHALLENGE FOR ALL ACTORS IN SOCIETY

Actors tend to blame each other or something else when confronted with the issue of sustainable consumption. Consumers complain about companies offering no or not enough alternatives, and if they do, products tend to be expensive. Companies blame business partners for not being interested in their innovations, and business partners state that their clients talk about socially and ecologically-benign products, but do not actually purchase them. The state in particular is to be blamed for everything.

The strive towards sustainable consumption patterns and lifestyles can only be successful, when all actors are fully aware of their responsibility within their sphere of influence. Actors include industries and businesses, consumers and the state, but also sub-political organisations such as churches, trade unions, consumer initiatives, environmental and development organisations as well as the media.

The German Federal Environmental Agency (UBA) has therefore started an initiative, which is supposed to draw together all actors to discuss their respective areas of influence and to establish certain measures. Representatives of most actors were already participating in the creation of the draft to the Tutzinger proposal „Steps towards sustainable consumption“ in 1997. German NGOs warmly welcomed this initiative. Unfortunately, the process has now reached a deadlock and threatens to die off completely. The Forum on Environment and Development therefore asks the UBA and the ministry for environment, to relaunch the project and to prepare a report on its experiences for the coming CSD.

4.1 Tasks for the economy

The consumer goods industry should:

- find substitutes for environmentally-harmful and socially-sustainable products
- promote research into and development of socially-sustainable, environmentally-neutral, long-term, repairable and recyclable products
- sufficiently mark their products in terms of

product contents, production method (e.g. genetically-engineered), use value etc. to consumers to alleviate their choice

- attempt to draw on regional resources and markets
- design attractive and positive-looking products
- when producing in developing countries producers should apply the same environmental and social standards valid in their home countries

The trade should:

- use ecologically and socially-sustainable products
- offer ecological services
- offer integrated repair and service performances

Agricultural producers should:

- increase their supply of ecologically-benign agricultural products
- expand husbandry of farm animals which takes into account their welfare
- engage in the building and enforcement of regional structures (cultivation, processing, marketing)

Shops and stores should:

- integrate ecologically and socially-sustainable products into their range of offers and display the products visibly
- offer sufficient information and advice about these products
- integrate alternative products into advertisements
- establish the space for goods to be returned or borrowed

The banking sector and insurance companies should:

- extend their credits and loans onto innovative projects which support socially and ecologically sustainable production and consumption
- offer and promote investments with ethical and ecological standards

The advertising industry should:

- make available their skills to popularise and propagate sustainable consumption and lifestyles

- be concerned with the channelling of information about the social and ecological aspects of products and services through advertisements

It is generally a great opportunity to improve competition in the economy, as the aims of sustainable development could serve as a drive for innovation (even more so when coupled with economic incentives such as tax reforms etc.). In addition, completely new areas for services are created. This can result in the creation of new jobs whilst maintaining old ones.

4.2 Tasks for consumers

Consumers should:

- choose ecologically and socially-sustainable goods on the grounds of the above named criteria
- prefer products from regional producers
- use products longer
- be willing to try common use of goods
- be critical towards their own lifestyle

4.3 Tasks for Non-governmental organisations, trade unions and churches

Environmental and development organisations should:

- express clear claims to the state and to economic actors to take into account their responsibility towards sustainable consumption
- initiate and promote pilot projects
- initiate competition (e.g. 'The most sustainable household 1999')
- promote a sustainable consumption and lifestyle within their overall framework of raising awareness

trade unions should:

- raise awareness amongst their members about the issue of sustainable consumption and the implications for the environment and developing world
- put more emphasis on qualitative aspects rather than on purely material, quantitative aspects when negotiating tariffs
- utter claims to state and economic actors demanding the improvement of the framework for sustainable consumption and

lifestyles of employees

Churches should:

- demonstrate the links between consumption, environmental protection and social and development issues
- integrate the aims of sustainability into their traditional ethics
- convince their members about the merits of sustainable consumption and lifestyles

4.4 Tasks for science, media and advice-giving bodies

Scientific institutions should:

- develop clear indicators for sustainability in each consumption sector
- research into the conditions that help facilitate or prevent the success of sustainable consumption and lifestyles and communicate these insights and inform the respective actors

The media should:

- demonstrate the links between consumption, environmental protection and social and development issues
- intensively publish practical examples and initiatives concerned with sustainable consumption and lifestyles
- communicate the conditions that facilitate or prevent the implementation of sustainable consumption and lifestyle
- carry out competitions with other organisations (see above)

Advice-bodies for consumers should:

- inform and raise awareness amongst consumers about sustainable consumption possibilities
- forward claims to state and economic actors

Environmental advice bodies should:

- support structural, lawful and financial measures

4.5 Tasks for the state and communities

The state should provide the necessary framework to allow that new products, services and forms of product use gain ground. It should draw on its wide range of instruments (including economic incentives, regulatory political elements and voluntary commitment).

Communities play a particular role in this process, as they are closest to the people and constitute arenas where changes and success are most visibly and experienced in daily life.

The state should:

- develop a national strategy for sustainability, which includes clear aims and time frames for sustainable consumption (e.g. From when on should a certain amount of a particular product be derived from sustainable agriculture only?).
- allow socially and ecologically-sustainable alternatives to gain equal chances on the market through an ecological tax reform
- orientate its subsidisation and promotion policies along the criteria of sustainability
- provide a convincing, expressive and harmonised marking of products and services (eco-labels)
- promote the dialogue between all above named actors to aim for the establishment of clear strategies as well as measures and time tables
- support NGOs so they can take care of their role as initiators, advisors and critics
- prohibit or highly tax products that harm people's health
- be aware of its function as a role model

Communities should:

- initiate and translate into action the local Agenda 21 and within this framework make sustainable consumption and lifestyles topical (local forums of consumption)
- act within the framework of their influence (procurement, placing of tasks, communal companies and establishments) along the criteria of sustainability