

SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION - CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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UNEP's sustainable consumption programme takes an integrated approach aimed at putting various tools for both consumers and producers in perspective:

- **Information** (consumer trends, Life Cycle Assessment, Indicators);
- **Inspiration** (eco-design, product and services systems, local initiatives);
- **Communication** (advertising, training, education);

Once we recognise that production and consumption are **two sides of the same coin** (see Chapter 4 of Agenda 21, adopted at the Earth Summit in 1992), the need for policies and strategies that encourage changes in current consumption and production patterns is obvious. By working with a consumption and production framework – one can also say one is applying life cycle economy. Life cycle economy provides an integrated approach to sustainable production and consumption policies – as chains or networks of actors. The UNEP sustainable consumption programme applies this “life cycle approach” to consumer needs. It focuses on understanding the driving forces behind consumption – using them to inspire cost-effective improvements and raising the quality of life in all parts of the world. The recent Global Ministerial Environment Forum, held in Malmö, Sweden in May 2000, endorsed such an approach for use worldwide, and asked UNEP to prepare a program of action to give guidance to countries in its implementation.

Up to now, efforts have largely concentrated on the *production* side: for example, minimisation of raw materials use, prevention of pollution at source, and reducing risks to health and environment. Awareness is growing about the need for more emphasis on causal factors – driving forces – in environmental degradation. The impact from the entire product life cycle is now regarded just as important as the pollution from the manufacturing processes. There is a realisation that our global consumption of natural resources is excessive, and that we need to dematerialise our society in terms of consumption demands as well as the products themselves. The time has now come to give greater attention to the other side of the coin – *consumption*. The power of consumption – as a driving force towards sustainable development – is in many ways greater than the power of legislative and regulatory measures.

There is no question about it. Knowing what the consumer wants, knowing how to best answer to its needs and knowing how to communicate applies to developed and developing countries alike. However, as UNEP's First African Roundtable on Cleaner Production and Sustainable Consumption held in Nairobi in Kenya in August 2000, has shown, priorities related to consumption are distinct in different parts in the world. This calls for a wide range of

approaches and respect for cultures in different parts of the world. Equitable sharing of resources, among and within countries, is at the heart of sustainable consumption efforts. In the developing world, clearly, the first priority is securing an increased access to basic needs for everyone. More than a billion people live on less than a dollar a day. Sustainable consumption for them means: consume *more!* Basic resources are often used very inefficiently by those who are most impoverished, simply because they do not have the means to act in another way. Enabling people to consume *differently* is a challenge that needs to be addressed by the international community as well as the wealthier part of the population in developing countries.

In industrialised countries - who in RIO in 1992 agreed to take the lead in promoting the sustainable consumption agenda - the issue of “sufficiency” needs to be addressed: how to move from consumption patterns based on quantitative values (“more is always better”) to enlightened consumption based on qualitative values (“quality over quantity”).

UNEP’s focus

More and more people are interested in the "**world that lies behind the products**" they buy. It is not only the price and quality that counts, today people also want to know how and where and by whom the product has been produced. Furthermore, business and governments are increasingly becoming aware about the **user phase of the product life cycle**.

Paying attention to what the consumer want is increasingly important. This is an art in itself: finding out consumer trends, what do people expect from their products, how to best communicate. UNEP has taken the initiative to work with the **Advertising Industry**. ("advertising for a better world"). We are collecting information on consumer trends through our **youth and consumption** research project (together with UNESCO) and through a web-based global survey focusing on the "**global consumer class**"

Communication all very well. But what to communicate: reliable information is the key. This is why UNEP is developing a global LCA initiative, together with the scientific world – SETAC. Outputs: set of indicators, set of data, publicly accessible for businesses. Will boost use of LCA world-wide, as follow up of our Towards a Global Use of LCA publication.

Information on trends, information on environmental impacts, will serve to assist businesses and governments in shaping new products (**eco-design**), services (**product service systems**) and policies. Developing tools and training the users - in developed and developing countries alike - is important to bring about the mainstreaming of the issue. We are glad to have Carl Duisberg Gesellschaft (CDG) working with us. And we know that the **NCPC's** are increasingly confronted with questions about the issue and are most willing to assist us in responding to the changing needs of their customers.

Finally, sustainable consumption activities is more than helping to sell better cleaner products. In our regional roundtable initiative we focus on the different meanings and focuses in different cultures. In developing countries, as for instance our recent African roundtable, has shown, the priority of consumption policies is **increased access to basic needs for the poor**.

Consume more, consume better. That's also SC! And the international community has to assist in that, as well as the growing middle and upper classes in developing countries themselves. In the developed world, OECD countries, the issue of "**sufficiency**" needs to be addressed. How to move from consumption patterns based on quantitative values ("more is always better") to enlightened consumption, based on qualitative values ("quality over quantity"). With Norwegian support we are hosting the **SC Network**, its newsletter is published 3-weekly on the web.

Glance at Sustainable Consumption

Sustainable consumption is about improving quality of life for all. An improved quality of life is achieved by implementing tools for change while addressing environmental, economic, social and cultural dimensions. Opportunities from sustainable consumption arise by identifying win-win solutions to be implemented both at the local and global level. Some common opportunity elements include to develop meaning-full jobs, consider the local resource and knowledge base, and working within the parameters of what nature provides by using renewable materials and energy. Moreover, opportunities can be identified when working within a life cycle framework, applying cleaner and safer production practices to minimise pollution. Sustainable consumption and production opportunities may come from mainstream economic development, since this provides the income and employment needed for eradicating poverty and improving the quality of life of citizens world wide. In doing so, it makes sense to try and avoid the mistakes that developed countries have made on their path to industrialisation (leap-frogging). Developing countries could explore their own specific paths for industrial development, making use of its strengths, while building on the increasing awareness among consumers world-wide about the environmental and social aspects of the products they buy.

Constraints for sustainable consumption patterns can be grouped as economic, structural and lack of information and communication. Looking at the economic dimension, challenges are linked to such factors as the price of products and taxation schemes. Thinking of the structural dimensions, many countries lack an efficient infrastructure and policy platform to deal with environmental issues efficiently i.e. waste management, energy and transportation. Governments have to do their job by creating a productive framework, and UNEP would like to help. Awareness within government, business and consumers to make informed changes should be improved. As a response, communication strategies are being explored and an initiative to promote the tool of Life Cycle Assessment will be developed. This helps organising the quality and accessibility of environmental information.

Summary and Key Questions

Working within a framework of a life cycle economy requires focusing on both sides of the coin - sustainable consumption and cleaner production - to make sure that the most efficient tools and strategies are being considered. UNEP would like to take this opportunity to get input on trends and ideas on how to target sustainable household consumption more directly. We would like to hear about your experiences and ideas on work attending to consumer behaviours and trends, communication tools and strategies, as well as inspirational instruments

such as design, LCA, labelling, and stakeholder analysis. What would be the best next steps to address these issues in an efficient manner?

- What are the key issues to address to attain sustainable consumption and cleaner production patterns internationally, and what are some common elements for the emerging global consumer class?
- What should we know about stakeholders, and what are their needs with regards to awareness raising, training and networking?
- What do we need to know about consumer behaviour and trends to identify the best way to inform and communicate about sustainable consumption and cleaner production?
- What should be done to help business explore innovative approaches to enhance their environmental performance?
- Who should be our main partners, and what should they do alone and together with UNEP to advance changing consumption and production patterns?