



Strong Sustainable Consumption – Governing levels and patterns of consumption?

Dr. Sylvia Lorek



Strong Sustainable Consumption –

- 1) the need to drastically reduce resource consumption
- 2) the boundaries of the “green consumerism” approach

Governing levels and patterns of consumption?

- 3) the potential of the “degrowth” discourse.

Why to drastically reduce resource consumption

- Extraction of 'conventional' crude oil peaked in 2006; most major fields were discovered in the 1960s and production from them is declining at 4-6% per year (and 'new' oil cannot keep up)
- 63 of the 89 non-renewable resources that enable high-tech industrial society had become globally scarce by 2008
- 82% of monitored fish-stocks were fully exploited or overexploited by 2008 (32% are overexploited, up from 10% in the 1970s)
- 30% of the world's arable land has become unproductive; soil erosion/degradation continues at 10 to 40 times the rate of natural replenishment

Development of the Earth Overshoot Day

1987	1990	1995	2000	2005	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
19. 12.	07. 12.	21. 11.	01. 11.	20. 10.	26. 10.	23. 09.	25.09.	21. 08.	27. 09.	22. 08.	20. 08.

(Mis-) Understandings of Sustainable Consumption

What to make sustainable?

If people talk about Sustainable Consumption what do they understand
“Consumption” to stand for?

- Household consumption (consumption habits, possession items)
- Consumption in economic terms (private consumption + public consumption)
- Resource consumption (business and industries also consumers)

(1) Sustainable Consumption has to reflect *resource* consumption

if not

→ discussions might get lost in marginal instead of relevant impacts

(Mis-) Understandings of Sustainable Consumption

Why making consumption sustainable?

The major cause of the continued deterioration of the **global environment** is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, ...

which is a matter of grave concern, aggravating **poverty** and **imbalances**

(Agenda 21, own emphasis)

“the use of services and related products which respond to **basic needs** and bring a better **quality of life** while **minimising the use of natural resources** and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life-cycle so as not to jeopardise the needs of **future generations.**”

(Oslo Symposium 1994, own emphasis)

(2) Sustainable Consumption has an environmental and a development aspect

→ The well-being of people matters!

...and their (resource) consumption is an important aspect in it



Debunking Weak Sustainable Consumption

Recent Sustainable Consumption policies:

- Concentration on environmental aspects and their technical solution
- Search for solutions focusing on goods and services in form of commodities
- Economic growth as the major indicator for a 'better life'

Such weak Sustainable Consumption approaches at best reflect a green consumerism. They might contribute to less unsustainable consumption but they neither meet the dimension nor the urgency of the problem



Towards Strong Sustainable Consumption

Turning towards Strong Sustainable Consumption means highlighting that:

- Growth and rebound effects compensate technological efficiency gains
- Social and societal innovation are as important
- Well-being is correlated with material consumption up to a certain level only
- Well-being also depends on social aspects

This closely correlates Strong Sustainable Consumption to Degrowth



Towards Strong Sustainable Consumption Governance

What makes the difference of Strong Sustainable Consumption?

- It inquires into appropriate levels of consumption (absolute reductions within sustainability limits)
- It questions affluence and its underlying growth paradigm
- It demands reallocation of resources to those with the highest marginal utility rate, the poor and thus improves the overall wellbeing of society without growth
- It supports well-being effects decoupled from market activities and economic growth rates (the ‘good life’ in contrast to the ‘better life’)

Governance strategies for Strong Sustainable Consumption

From Green Consumerism(or weak SC)	To Degrowth (or strong SC)
Efficiency	Sufficiency and efficiency
Relative decoupling	Absolute reductions within sustainability limits
Green products	Sustainable life styles (and sustainable livelihoods)
Peanuts – small changes	Big Points – most important areas
Supporting Sustainable Consumer Procurement	Limiting unsustainable options
Quality of life (hurry for better life)	Basic needs (contentedness and search for good life)
Corporate responsibility	Corporate accountability
Technological solutions	Technological and social innovation
Market activities count	Including non-market activities
Demand side management (markets greed)	Supply side management (available resources)
Prices solve shortage of resources	Reallocation of resources towards basic needs



Thank you for your attention..

...it's your turn now

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Debunking Weak Sustainable Consumption

The $I=P*A*T$ formula

Impact on the environment = Population x Affluence x Technology

What we know: Impact↓ = Population↑

What Weak Sustainable
Consumption promotes:

Affluence↑

What we don't know:

Technology (?)

The hope of the proponents of weak sustainable consumption solely rests on the optimistic view about (upcoming) technological solutions

Debunking Weak Sustainable Consumption

Living situation for global population

Policy approach	Living situation for global population	
	Technology can solve the problems	Technology can't solve the problems
Weak Sustainable Consumption policy	High material standard of living for some; less poverty for others?	Living in misery for most
Strong Sustainable Consumption policy	High human well-being for most	Balanced living for most