

# **Analysis of latest outcomes of academic work on sustainable consumption 2010-2012**

**Brief**

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## 1. Introduction

This paper provides a snapshot of the latest (2010-2012) academic work on sustainable consumption, including discourses, trends and lessons.

Sustainable consumption is a diverse and rapidly expanding area of academic research, exciting in that it brings together so many academic disciplines, and provides fertile ground for knowledge brokerage in its natural span from theory to policy and practice. Using the Social Sciences Citation Index database the study found 723 papers on sustainable consumption published from early 1990 to 2011 (Aoyagi et al., 2011). The papers cover a broad range of, e.g. academic fields (micro, and macro economics, environmental accounting, psychology, sociology, policy); environmental fields (climate change, waste treatment, biodiversity conservation); domains (energy, food, mobility, housing), scales (individuals, households, cities, sub-national, national, regional and global), theoretical and methodological contributions and case studies (Aoyagi et al., 2011). The literature analysis identified the following trends in knowledge production in the sustainable consumption field: 1) increased efficiency of consumption does not result in reduced resource use, rather in increased consumption of resources; 2) sustainable consumption is sometimes interchanged with sustainable lifestyles 3) recent research trends include a practice theory which contains the discussion on systems of provision, and there is 4) an increasing number of papers on sustainable consumption in developing countries, especially China. The results of this literature study provides a solid starting point for the present meta-analysis that focuses on the rich and maturing status of the sustainable consumption field reflected in the growing number of publications in academic journals in 2010-2012, and particularly in the number of special issues on sustainable consumption, as well as in the number of events, conferences and workshops, organised on sustainable consumption during 2010-2012.

## 2. Method

The brief is based on the meta-analysis of literature on sustainable consumption originated in 2010-2012, including academic publications and peer-review conference articles. The scientific publications were retrieved by using Social Science database and EBSCO database; in addition the following specific sources of information were used:

1. the overview of 7 special issues on sustainable consumption published in 2010-2012: Journal of Consumer Policy (2012), Journal of Consumer Policy (2011), Journal of Industrial Ecology (2010), The Natural Resources Forum (2010), Journal of Macromarketing (2010), European Journal of Marketing (2011), Journal of Consumer Behaviour (2010).
2. the latest contributions to the side event to Rio+20 GRF workshop on "Global and Regional Research on Sustainable Consumption and Production Systems: Achievements, Challenges and Dialogues" to be held on 13-15 June 2012 in Rio de Janeiro.
3. research contributions to the conference "Sustainable consumption – Towards Action and Impact" held in Hamburg in November 2011.
4. academic papers presented at the first Trans-Atlantic SCORAI workshop "Sustainable Consumption During Times of Crisis", held in May 2012 in Bregenz.
5. publications of the on-going EU project on knowledge brokerage Responder [http://www.scp-responder.eu/knowledge\\_base](http://www.scp-responder.eu/knowledge_base)
6. the stock-taking of the literature conducted in 2011 in the frame of the European project on Sustainable lifestyles 2050 <http://www.sustainable-lifestyles.eu/>

The brief focused on meta-analysis of articles, book chapters and conference contributions that were of relevance for the general discourse on sustainable consumption and consumer behaviour

and avoided sources that presented results of relevance for specific domains of household consumption, even those of relevance from sustainability perspective, e.g. food, mobility, housing or tourism.

The main themes that emerged during the literature analysis were used to structure the brief. The last section summarises the main lessons learned from the meta-analysis.

### 3. Determinants of consumer behaviour

Consumer behaviour is growing in importance as a research field together with increasing focus on the role of human behaviour in sustainable consumption and sustainable society. There is a growing discrepancy between the awareness of the negative impacts of consumption and the need for solutions on the one hand, and a slow progress to identifying solutions, finding consensus among stakeholders and implementing them on the other hand (Ekström, 2010). The mainstream research on sustainable consumption can be conceptualised in terms of identifying determinants of consumer behaviour, understanding consumer attitudes and choices and the potential to steer consumer behaviour a in more sustainable direction. This conceptualisation is now being scrutinised by a growing community of practice theory researchers (Shove, 2010). The outcomes of this research add great depth to social science knowledge; however, the conceptualisations offered so far are limited in their application to sustainable consumption policy making and the transformative consumer research community eager to advance change in society (McDonagh et al., 2011). So while acknowledging this important research, we focus here on research with direct policy relevance.

When it comes to *determinants of consumer behaviour* the academic debate continues on whether context (availability and attractiveness of consumption possibilities) or values and attitudes are more important in shifting behaviour towards sustainability (Schrader and Thøgersen, 2011). Research on the context of consumption has expanded from its initial focus on consumer behaviour to include the role of government policy – both the direct influences of taxes, regulations, information etc, and the indirect influence on companies, NGOs and wider society. As a result, there is also a growing body of literature on sustainable or green marketing that addresses the role of business marketing strategies in shaping consumer behaviour (Belz and Peattie, 2009) and the strengths and weaknesses of such strategies (Sheth et al., 2011). More recent theoretical work is emerging that demonstrates the importance of both the wider societal context, infrastructure and environmental awareness in shaping consumer behaviour (Banbury et al., 2012).

*Media and entertainment businesses* are also very influential steering mechanisms for consumer culture even though their influence is less direct than e.g. policy interventions. This however does not mean that they are less intrusive or powerful. On the contrary, values and perceptions are shaped every minute of the day through an increasing number of communication channels. For example a study of the top ten business movies<sup>1</sup> were analysed from an ecological perspective. It was found that nature in these movies was represented as an economic resource to be exploited by businesses, which is problematic for sustainability as it perpetuates the dominant social paradigm including promotion of materialism, and downplays the potential for businesses to contribute to sustainability (McDonagh and Brereton, 2010: 133). Other studies also provide evidence of the importance of film in shaping culture, and the need for nature to be presented in non-anthropocentric ways (Kilbourne, 2010). New visions and images are required “for what sustainable consumption looks like, and it needs to get as much visibility as the Kardashians lifestyles on MTV” (SCORAI, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> Selected by an expert panel for Forbes magazine.

## 4. Steering consumer behaviour

In terms of *steering consumer behaviour*, an analysis of the *leverage points* needed to shift the cultural paradigm towards sustainable lifestyles identified six key institutions: education, business, governments, media, social movements and sustainable traditions (Assadourian, 2010). There are a huge number of positive initiatives already underway, but they are unlikely to be enough as long as the vast majority of wealth and resources are used to create cultures of consumption. So in recent work, Assadourian (2012) calls for reducing overall consumption by overconsumers and provides examples of economic instruments, such as tax on advertising, choice editing strategies, introduction of a Tobin tax on financial transactions, sharing work hours better and cultivating a plenitude economy as potential ways towards framing more sustainable values in society.

*Choice editing* is a relatively new notion that is built on the insights of behavioural economics on shaping behavioural choices by policy and business. Thaler and Sunstein's book 'Nudge' has had influence on policy makers in the UK, USA (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) and the EU. The underlying premise is that humans tend to make poor choices about money, health and so on, because we are often biased in various ways. By knowing how people think, it is argued, it is possible to design choice environments that make it easier for people to choose what is best for themselves, their families, and the society as a whole. Thoughtful 'choice architecture' can be established to nudge us in beneficial directions with an acceptable impact on absolute freedom of choice. Recent research in behavioural economics and sustainable choice has shown that "consumer behaviour is much more dependent on the stimuli and barriers in the immediate choice contexts and is influenced to a far greater extent by human biases and heuristics than has been assumed in consumer science" (Reisch and Bietz, 2011). Therefore choice editing and providing sustainable defaults have been shown to be more effective in nudging consumers in a sustainable direction than information provision.

The favourite policy tool for steering consumer behaviour has been and remains to be *information* provision. The evidence however is mounting of vast limitations of information provision for changing consumer behaviour. The long existing research on the behaviour-action gap is now joined by new evidence on the increasing competition of environmental or sustainability information with other types of communications directed at consumers, both in places of consumption and beyond, such as increasingly complicated information about financial arrangements associated with product purchasing, but also aesthetics, politics, and ethical responsibility, e.g. fashion consumption. Researchers suggest that "uncontested knowledge often does not exist" and policy makers need to take this polyphony into account while planning sustainable consumption policy (Markkula and Moisander, 2012).

The *workplace* can also steer behaviour, e.g. by providing knowledge about green products and behaviours, and creating habits and norms that encourage further sustainable action at home. Corporate programmes, such as "Environment Champions", can assist in instigating change; success comes from renegotiating the implicit rules of conventional office life, so that as new environmental behaviours are expected of staff, they can continue to comply and conform with the new norms (Nye and Hargreaves 2010).

On the other hand, most research finds that working life negatively impacts on sustainable living: long working hours restrict time e.g. for recycling, sustainable mobility etc; higher incomes usually result in higher consumption levels; high work demands promote low-effort consumption options that are often the least sustainable e.g. fast-food dinners; employees may mitigate stress using unsustainable compensation activities (Devetter and Rousseau, 2011). Offering reduced working hours (with reduced income) frees up time for changing habits, choosing sustainable options and engaging in self-production activities (Schor, 2010): it may also increase life satisfaction and reduce stress, which could decrease sick leave and the need for public spending on compensation (Mick et

al., 2011). Other measures include flexible work hours and locations; however, Muster (2012: 171) concludes that work-life-balance activities are insufficient: “it seems necessary to fundamentally restructure and reorganize working life”. Although redistribution of work-time is not a guarantee of environmental benefits or of well-being (although reduced income limits consumption rebound effects), several researchers suggest that changing work-time norms and stimulating real choice would be more successful in promoting sustainable lifestyles than attempts to directly reduce levels of consumption (van den Bergh, 2011).

A new addition to the study of steering mechanisms on consumer behaviour is research on the role of the on-going *economic and financial crises* for consumption patterns and levels. For example, a study of consumer behaviour change during the ongoing economic crisis in Spain reveals that people are more likely to engage in turning off lights and recycle at home to save money, as well as biking even despite an absence of appropriate infrastructure (Porro et al., 2011). Another paper on austerity asks the question about the dissonance that is created in society during economic overreach when the gap between public aspirations for a good life and the ability of the economic system to deliver is increasing. Cohen (2012b) studies the cultural dissonance associated with crises manifested in different ways in the USA, Europe and Japan and looks for signs of an emerging post-consumerism mentality. He concludes that the transition process towards a new post-consumerist era is long and that at present scholars and other stakeholders need to formulate visions for more sustainable post-consumer societies.

## 5. Social innovation and community engagement

*Collaborative Consumption* is an example of social innovation that is becoming a buzz word (Botsman and Rogers, 2010b). It is a name for a way of consuming where people share their possessions with other people while they are not using them, through various types of (mostly informal) social networks. It can be seen as a revival of our traditional ways of living in social groups where sharing and lending, as well as bartering and swapping was a natural part of everyday life. The primary idea of collaborative consumption is based on the notion that instead of individual product ownership, services and skills are exchanged or sold (Gansky, 2010). Schemes of collaborative consumption can be organised by private people or companies, by local authorities, NGOs, communities or social enterprises and entrepreneurs. Examples of collaborative consumption can be divided into 3 groups (Botsman and Rogers, 2010a):

- *Product service systems* enable companies to offer goods as a service rather than sell them as products. Goods that are privately owned can be shared or rented peer-to-peer.
- *Redistribution markets* provide platforms for utilising the idling capacity of used or owned goods by moving products from somewhere they are not needed to somewhere they are. In some schemes the goods are exchanged for free (e.g. Freecycle and Kashless), while in others they are swapped (as on thredUP and SwapTree) or sold for cash (as on eBay and craigslist).
- *Collaborative lifestyles* unite people with similar needs or interests to share and exchange less-tangible assets such as time, space, skills, and money, most often on a local or neighborhood level, as people share working spaces (for example, on Citizen Space or Hub Culture), gardens (on SharedEarth or Landshare), or parking spots (on ParkatmyHouse). However, examples also exist at a global level too, such as peer-to-peer lending (Zopa and Lending Club) and the rapidly growing peer-to-peer travel (Airbnb and Roomorama).

Although theoretically collaborative consumption and its shaping of the economy should result in reduced material and resource flows, there has been no research conducted on actual evaluation of the environmental profiles of these schemes. What are the real changes in resource flows as a result

of sharing schemes, especially in business-to-consumer and in consumer-to-consumer markets? Do these schemes have a potential to become mainstream models of consumption and what kind of changes for consumption patterns and levels they will lead to. What is known is that shifting some part of the household chores to these activities “expands a household’s options with respect to employment choices, time use, and consumption” (Schor, 2010: 116). The prominent American sociologist Juliet Schor believes that the “... more self-provisioning one can do, the less income one has to earn to reproduce a standard of living.” She calls for controlled reduction of the consumer economy with more people supporting themselves through formal and informal economic activities.

Another type of social innovation of relevance for sustainable consumption discourse is *community-led* sustainable energy *projects* that are for example flourishing in the UK. These types of projects now constitute a niche movement that is of great interest to policy-makers and academics working on promotion of sustainable consumption. The UK Government has created various financial and practical support schemes with the intention of facilitating a scaling-up of transitions to sustainable energy generation and low-carbon communities. Major challenges for grassroots innovations include lack of institutional support which results in spending up to 90% of their time on securing funding and other logistics; community values may clash with local commercial interests; scaling-up projects may mean “mainstreaming” and watering-down principles, resulting in a shallower-yet-wider greening of less active groups (Hielscher et al., 2011: 6). The distinctive opportunities offered by community energy projects include working with approaches and interests with local resonance; the ability to change the local context, by providing infrastructure, opportunities, and highly visible norms, and so facilitate more successful community behaviour change; engagement with the wider community; opportunities to experiment with alternative living in a supportive environment where alternative values are possible (Hielscher et al., 2011). Policy-makers and businesses may find useful solutions from this sector, for example, in cutting demand; these projects create “seeds of change” within wider systems by creating spaces “where the rules of everyday life, socio-economic exchange and citizenship are different” (Hielscher et al., 2011: 17).

## 6. Sustainable lifestyles in an unsustainable world

A strong trend in current research is analysis of the barriers faced by *citizen-consumers* who self-identify as “green”: they have knowledge about sustainable lifestyles, are highly motivated and are taking some action. Although such people identify sustainable living as an “environmental” issue, they articulate their reasoning in terms of civic responsibilities, such as impacts on vulnerable people in other countries, or concern for future generations: high levels of private consumption are understood to be at the expense of the public good (Evans, 2011: 114). All research shows that despite their efforts, these people are not able to undertake all the sustainable behaviours they are aware of or aspire to. Sometimes this is due to lack of time or price disincentives: however, the greatest barriers are social, which “reminds us that consumption fulfils an important social function in our societies, helping us to signal belonging, mutual understanding, and adherence to shared societal norms and cultural logic” (Isenhour, 2010: 463). Most people find it stressful to have a lifestyle that is significantly different from their peers (Isenhour, 2010). There are usually no taboos for unsustainable behaviours, such as car ownership or meat consumption; in fact often the reverse is true, and those attempting to live sustainably feel obliged to justify their choices. A study of eco-village residents confirmed this point: people felt that living in an eco-village among ‘like-minded’ neighbours “made it easier to stay motivated and maintain a sustainable lifestyle due to the support and shared knowledge”, while the mainstream respondents residing in a “traditional suburban community valued not being bound by the challenge of leading a sustainable lifestyle in a ‘non-sustainable world’ (Miller and Bentley, 2012). Less ambitious and thus more accessible sustainable behaviours “amount to little more than tinkering around the edges”, which suggests that significant

normalisation of sustainable lifestyles are unlikely to be generated by the efforts of an enthusiastic minority (Evans, 2011: 115).

These results are supported by another study that compared 'green consumers' (those who self-report high levels of pro-environmental behaviour) with 'brown consumers' (those who do not voluntarily take sustainable actions) and found no significant difference in environmental footprint for most people (Csutora, 2012). It is suggested that this is due to the promotion of marginal consumer actions that are less politically sensitive, as well as rebound effects, such as compensating for 'good behaviour' by consuming more. This highlights a need to focus on facilitating high-impact changes in lifestyle across society; awareness-raising for low-impact voluntary actions is inadequate for reducing ecological impacts (Csutora, 2012).

Policy makers often state that achieving sustainability requires consumers to choose and buy more sustainable products: The emerging theoretical field of *anti-consumption* challenges this assumption, by focusing on attempts to lower levels of consumption directly. The research studies actions such as rejection, reuse, recycling and sharing, which can replace consumption, but have often been neglected by researchers. Anti-consumption research also offers insights into the limited penetration of green consumption, through the study of why consumers avoid certain products and brands, or instead choose not to buy anything at all. This leads to one of the most interesting theoretical contributions from anti-consumption: the idea that sustainability may not need to involve sustainable consumers at all (Eckhardt et al., 2010, Black and Cherrier, 2010); rather that we develop everyday practices and identities that lead us to consume only as required, perhaps invoking values of thrift and frugality common in earlier generations (Black, 2010). Special issues on anti-consumption research in the *European Journal of Marketing* (2011) and *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* (2010) shed light on people who make serious attempts to live and consume sustainably, but feel that buying less stuff is one of the hardest aspects, due to the pressures of consumerism in wider society (Isenhour, 2010). Green behaviours, such as voluntary simplicity, have been viewed as deviant and damaging to modernity and growth, but are gradually becoming tolerated; however they are not fully accepted and are still viewed as "going against the grain", as they are still so different from "normal" consumer behaviours (Amine and Gicquel, 2011). Reflecting this, research in this field confirms that the role of governments in facilitating sustainable lifestyles remains important even when individuals are highly motivated (Breukers et al., 2011), and that both proscription (choice editing etc.) and pricing are useful policy tools for change (Sharp et al., 2010). Public policies and programmes are needed to facilitate the normalisation of sustainable lifestyles (SCORAI, 2012).

## 7. The role of policy making in sustainable consumption

There is a growing consensus among scientists and some politicians that "Environmental governance has largely taken a backseat to the pursuit of corporate-driven economic globalization—a process that has been marked by deregulation and privatization and thus a relative weakening of national political institutions" (Renner, 2012). The policies that do exist, mostly promote green consumerism rather than sustainable consumption and sustainable lifestyles, thus creating an illusion of progress while the levels of consumption, including household consumption, are still on the rise across the globe (Akenji, 2012). A study of three national strategies for sustainable consumption and production from frontrunning countries revealed that Finland and the UK are mostly focussed on efficiency, while Sweden also includes work on sufficiency (Berg, 2011). Analyses of national SCP policies highlight a lack of clear roadmaps towards sustainability, as well as certain reluctance by governments to engage with SCP and attempts to "outsource" responsibility for SCP to other actors, such as NGOs (Berg, 2012, Berg, 2011, Schrader and Thøgersen, 2011).

On the other hand, there is also a mounting evidence demonstrating and confirming that consumers are not the most salient agent for promoting sustainable consumption and thus, “expecting the consumer through green consumerism to shift society towards SCP patterns is consumer scapegoatism” (Akenji, 2012).

*Evaluation of policy effectiveness* and efficiency in the area of sustainable household consumption remains a challenge. “Despite the extensive literature on instrument effectiveness, sustainability assessment, and consumer behaviour, only a few accounts deal with the specific characteristics and impacts of policy instruments for sustainable consumption” (Wolff and Schönherr, 2011a). For example, a new policy evaluation framework has been suggested for conducting an ex post analysis of effects resulting from such policy instruments, including systematic assessment of resulting changes in consumption patterns, changes in the state of the environment (as well as changes in society and the economy) and side effects of policies (Wolff and Schönherr, 2011b).

Innovative elements in a range of European sustainable consumption policies were analysed and four key elements identified for modernising sustainable consumption instruments (Scholl et al. 2010). Creating peer groups, whether actual or virtual, enables citizens to surmount the significant barriers posed by unsustainable social norms and habits. Traditional eco-labelling is not able to keep pace with rapid product innovation cycles (e.g. consumer electronics); in such cases information provision is more effective through instruments such as “Top Ten” comparisons, which have shorter revision cycles. The evidence base for sustainable consumption policy-making needs to expand from its focus on technical data related to products and services, and include more social sciences data on values, attitudes, barriers to change etc. The social dimension of sustainability (e.g. fair-trade) is often missing from many policies; this is an area that needs strengthening. In addition, provision for sharing good practice needs to be extended (Scholl et al. 2010).

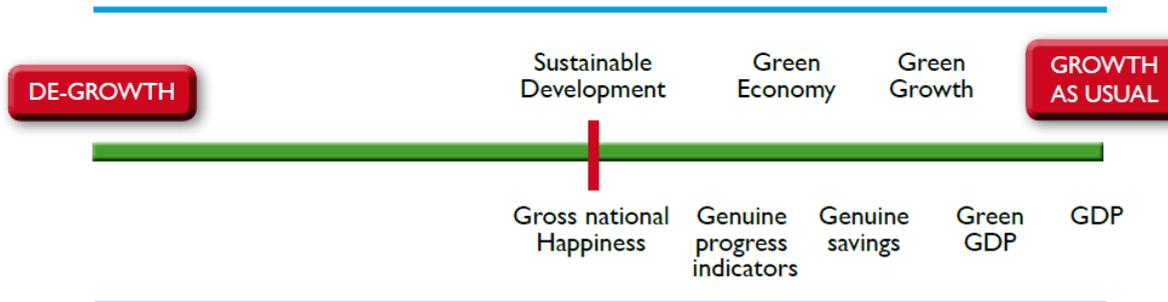
A growing research stream is on *public and consumer acceptance* of sustainable consumption policies. According to new research into the power of social norms and policy characteristics in influencing policy acceptability, people are more likely to accept stronger, more coercive environmental policies if others accept them too, (De Groot and Schuitema, 2012). For policy-makers, this demonstrates the importance of building and communicating social norms in order to expand the range of available effective policy tools (De Groot and Schuitema, 2012).

## **8. Growth and beyond growth discourse**

The recent economic, financial and environmental crises created a compelling ground for a shift in emphasis from a growth-based economy to alternative social development based on well-being. The academic discourse on alternative societal models is not new, but it has intensified in the light of the mounting evidence that growth as usual is no longer possible (ISIS Academy, 2012, Kallis, 2011). In recent years, the previously, mostly academic, discourse about growth has been joined by governmental and inter-governmental efforts (from France and Bhutan to UNEP and OECD) and by non-governmental and grassroots movements.

The spectrum of potential strategies to address the criticism on growth ranges from Green Growth to Greening the Economy initiatives to more progressive Sustainable Development and finally De-growth or beyond-growth movement.

## Frameworks



## Indicators

Figure 1 The range of theoretical frameworks and indicators from growth as usual to de-growth (ISIS Academy, 2012)

Research demonstrates that all the indicators presented in Figure 1, with exception of the Gross National Happiness, include economic growth as a positive feature – the indicators go up when GDP goes up or when there is growth in personal consumption. Policies for de-growth include encouraging shorter working hours; regulating advertising, particularly of status goods; taxing status goods that have high environmental impacts; promoting changes in attitudes and social norms; stimulating economists, politicians and the media to ignore GDP; and directing technological research towards environmental solutions (van den Bergh, 2011). There are also calls for introducing a ceiling (upper limit) for consumption and income and a floor (lower limit) for income (Spangenberg, 2012), as well as for progressive pricing to address the issue of status symbols, e.g. larger cars, bigger office, etc.

As debates on the compatibility of growth and sustainability continue, and the usefulness of GDP is further questioned, research now calls for a new strategy of 'a-growth' or beyond-growth: setting aside the GDP debate and instead focusing on policies that protect the environment and promote well-being (van den Bergh, 2011). The argument is that growth (as measured by GDP) has positive and negative consequences, and that GDP growth is not necessary or sufficient for social progress or sustainability. Van den Bergh (2011) and Cohen (2012a, 2012b) suggest that it is more helpful to transcend the duality of the growth debate - being 'for' or 'against' it and rather focus on creating alternative visions of society with different economic paradigms. This is also more likely to be politically acceptable than taking a radical de-growth stance.

Despite this, the frameworks presented have four features in common:

1. Growth as usual is not possible in the long term: together with benefits, exponential economic growth have produced huge side effects, such as climate change, destruction of ecosystem services, inequality and others.
2. GDP is an inadequate or even misleading indicator of progress. It has to be replaced by more appropriate indicators measuring the progress of human society and not only the economic system.
3. Alternatives to mainstream economic frameworks as indicator systems are both necessary and possible. The world is in the "search mode" looking for the macro-economic approaches to creating a "full-world" paradigm (Gran, 2012) within which the best possible mix of traditional economic thinking and the New Economic thinking could be established.
4. Human well-being and happiness are the vital goals of any economic framework. There seems to be a consensus about this point regardless of the economic school or political ideology.

There is a growing concern that Rio+20 conference will mainly focus on green growth for developing countries while little attention will be paid to beyond-growth strategies for developed world (discussions at the SCORAI workshop in May 2012).

## 9. From theory to action - knowledge brokerage

A recent trend in sustainable consumption builds on understanding that there is sufficient knowledge available from the long history of consumption and sustainability studies, but the knowledge is compartmentalised in scientific silos and framed in language that is not accessible either for policy makers or for the general public. There is still an unsolved and rarely touched upon question of how this scientific evidence can inform and influence real world policy-making (Reisch, 2011).

The new approach to knowledge creation exploits the results of existing research by providing a forum for stakeholders and by working through new integrative modalities that link research results to policy-making. Knowledge brokerage is a novel way of creating knowledge by linking scientists, policy makers, civil society organisations and other stakeholders in dialogues that help explore their positions, identify potential conflicting areas and together develop recommendations or even solutions for consensus-building. The goal of such projects<sup>2</sup> is not only to bridge the gap between science and policy, but also to improve the mutual understanding between divergent views on various sustainability-related issues, e.g. the pro-growth community and the beyond-growth community. Some knowledge brokerage projects use participatory systems mapping as a core methodology, which helps systematise empirical findings, question different model assumptions, analyse the effects of different policy options and identify new research questions.

## 10. Lessons

Sustainable consumption as research field is rich and divergent. Its contribution to the different developments in society is vital, including not only policy design, but also technological, social and business innovation. The importance of sustainable consumption research is likely to increase in the future and there is an on-going consolidation effort taking place, where different research communities discuss combining their efforts to advance sustainable consumption research and increase its visibility and impact in policy making process. Knowledge brokerage is now a key next step, ensuring policy-makers are able to make use of existing findings in order to implement consequential changes now.

Some areas would benefit from additional research. Currently the role of the business world in facilitating sustainable consumption is limited, with a major focus on green products; a discourse is needed to explore innovative models that will enable businesses to address consumption levels, for example through forms of collaborative consumption, alternative growth strategies, and cradle-to-cradle thinking. The research on anti-consumption shows how choosing to not consume is as relevant to sustainable living as choosing green products, and the explosion in collaborative consumption demonstrates clearly that people are open to other models of consumption – lessons that are crucial for businesses to assimilate in order to be both sustainable and successful. However, the business case and relations to the mainstream businesses are not always clear. Thus, research is needed in understanding the business case of collaborative consumption and its long term contribution to sustainable economics.<sup>3</sup>

Encouraging research on policy acceptability demonstrates that policies involving high-cost or proscriptive lifestyle changes can become much more acceptable to the public when they are

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<sup>2</sup> Responder [http://www.scp-responder.eu/knowledge\\_base](http://www.scp-responder.eu/knowledge_base) and FOODLINKS [www.foodlinkscommunity.net](http://www.foodlinkscommunity.net) and <http://purefoodlinks.eu/>

<sup>3</sup> Patagonia clothing company is an interesting example of a company that can have a limited growth strategy as it remains privately held, and is innovative in exploring new ways to make a profit while selling fewer, higher quality products and promoting environmental sustainability (see e.g. [http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/10/patagonias\\_buy\\_less\\_campaign.html](http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/10/patagonias_buy_less_campaign.html)).

associated with strong, positive social norms – in other words, people will support policies that may initially seem “too controversial” if they see that others also support the policy. This finding can empower policy-makers to go further and promote stronger interventions with greater positive environmental impacts. However it also points to the necessity for further research into large-scale promotion of new, pro-sustainability norms and practices (perhaps including use of social marketing), and in engaging society in devising future images and visions of sustainable lifestyles.

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