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A Global Review of Sustainable Consumption Policies

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In 2005, industrialized countries, which represent about 15 percent of the population, used nearly 50 percent of fossil energy and mineral resources (UNDESA 2010). The United States, with roughly 4 percent of the world's population, is responsible for nearly 25 percent of the world's emissions (Karlsson 2002). Such statistics point to the inequalities in consumption that have plagued the sustainable development debate since the late 1980s. Not only do industrialized countries use the majority of the world's resources for their own development, they leave little ecological space for developing countries or for future generations to meet their needs. At the upcoming United Nations (UN) Earth Summit in 2012, governments will be under increasing pressure to adopt development policies that address sustainable consumption in an equitable way.

The term "sustainable consumption" appears in the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) report *Our Common Future* (1987), which addressed concerns about the pace of environmental deterioration identified at the 1972 Stockholm Conference, including structural issues shaping production and consumption patterns. Global economic crises during the 1970s led to the adoption of free-market structural adjustment policies in developing countries; these, in turn, undermined subsistence farming practices that sustained both people and the land. Free-market policies drove the appropriation of subsistence lands for commercial use in global market production, and put short-term profits ahead of long-term environmental and human development goals. Dumping practices also allowed industrialized countries to maintain cheap supplies of goods domestically (Desai 2002). Through a critique of neoliberal globalization, the WCED report argued for an alternative program of development, "Sustainable development seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future" (1987: Chapter 1, II.49). The goal was to move development in a sustainable direction by encouraging ecological limits on production and consumption patterns in order to equitably address the needs of the poor.

Our Common Future helped frame the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio, which brought together more than 100 heads of state to address sustainable development. The outcome was *Agenda 21*, an action plan for sustainable development that recognizes the disparities in consumption patterns between the industrialized North and the developing South: "the major cause

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About the Author

Rebecca Gresh is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology. Her research interests include sustainability, supermarkets, and alternative food movements. She is participating in the Focal Point Group: Global Patterns of Sustainable Consumption (www.consumingsustainability.org), which is funded in part by the Center for Global Studies. Focal Point Groups are an initiative of the Graduate College at the University of Illinois. Professor Zsuzsa Gille, Department of Sociology, and Professor Diana Mincyte, Department of Advertising, are faculty co-organizers of the group.

Sustainable development is one model for addressing problems of global underdevelopment while also allowing citizens in Western nations to maintain existing ways of life.

The purpose of the “Global Patterns of Sustainable Consumption” Focal Group is to interrogate recent scholarship on sustainable consumption practices as relational, structural, and transnational issues that depend greatly on the technologies in use and thus on specific networks of humans and non-humans. Such connections are best studied by fieldwork methods because only through immersion in the time and place of our informants—farmers, workers, activists, and consumers—is it possible to see what social and material opportunities and constraints exist within a particular site for shepherding human consumption patterns towards sustainability.

Research projects of Focal Point Group participants utilize a wide range of disciplinary perspectives and social science and humanities methodologies to address socio-material constraints to sustainable consumption; power, governance and management; consumer-oriented metrics; transport; and morality. Specific topics include carbon trading, debates over nanotechnology, urban “greenwashing”, heritage livestock preservation, shifts in supermarket strategies, sustainable transportation and automobility ideologies, and sustainability, risk and safety in Eastern Europe.

of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries, which is a matter of grave concern, aggravating poverty and imbalances” (UN 1992: 4.3). In a chapter entitled “Changing Consumption Patterns” the report calls for understanding global consumption patterns and their environmental and social impacts, as well as national policies and strategies to encourage changes. The 1992 Rio Summit also established the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) to manage progress toward sustainable development.

After the Earth Summit, sustainable consumption gained traction within international policy circles. In 1994 the Norwegian Ministry for the Environment hosted a symposium on sustainable consumption, and in 1995 the CSD adopted an international work program on sustainable production and consumption that was prepared with input by governments, intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, business, trade unions, and the academic community (Berntsen 1995; Jackson 2006). In 1998, the UN Environment Program (UNEP) added its Sustainable Consumption Unit to supplement the Division of Technology, Industry and Economics (DTIE) sustainable production program. UNEP also publicized its definition of sustainable consumption:

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

Although the decade saw activity around the issue of sustainable consumption, there were some notable shortcomings. At the 1997 Earth Summit II meeting, whose purpose was to review the 5-year progress of *Agenda 21*, tensions emerged between industrialized and developing nations over gaps in social equity and poverty and declining support and official development assistance for developing countries. The conference established sustainable consumption and production patterns as an “overriding issue” of the yearly CSD agenda (Seyfang 2003). Ten years after Rio, the UNEP’s “Sustainable Consumption Global Status Report” of 2002 noted that increasing consumption in industrialized countries outweighed many of the eco-efficiency gains of cleaner production, product eco-design, environmental technology, eco-innovation and environmental management. In addition, rebound effects, such as increased consumption as a result of eco-efficiency improvements, resulted in increased consumption in absolute terms, despite energy efficiency gains and production improvements.

The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg reaffirmed the principles of the 1992 Earth Summit, and made changing consumption and production patterns one of the three pillars of sustainable development (Jackson 2006). At the WSSD, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) called for the creation of a ten-year framework of programs to quicken the pace of action around sustainable consumption and production patterns; the framework, adopted in 2003 in Marrakech, Morocco, became known as the Marrakech Process and is currently supported by both the UNEP and UNDESA. The overarching goals of the Marrakech Process are to bring about a green global economy by helping governments and corporations adopt greener policies and business models; promote sustainable consumer lifestyles; adoption of national and regional sustainable development plans, or National SCP Programs (in which 30 countries are now participating); and “draft a framework for sustainable consumption and production patterns that will be negotiated at the UN CSD in 2011,” with participation from national governments, development agencies, and civil society (UNDESA 2008). During the Marrakech Process, the CSD adopted the new concept of “sustainable

lifestyles,” which became a target area and separate task force: “Sustainable lifestyles are patterns of action and consumption, used by people to affiliate and differentiate themselves” (CSD 2004).

As a result of the Marrakech Process, there are numerous voluntary initiatives to address sustainable consumption and production, including seven task forces (see UNDESA 2010 for projects). The UNEP published many key reports and guidebooks for governments and businesses to promote consumer-citizen strategies for green production and lifestyles (2005a; 2005b; 2006), including the creation of TV spots on “Eco-tips for jeans” (2008), electronic waste (Rufo 2006), and a toolkit on responsible consumption aimed at the growing class of 15- to 25-year-old global consumers. Other initiatives, including public procurement policies that leverage government funds to support public policy initiatives such as green purchasing, have been adopted by Canada, the EU, Japan, China, Mexico, and the US. Eco-tax measures that target consumer-citizen behavior, such as Finland’s 1990 Carbon Dioxide Tax, Chicago’s 2007 bottled water tax, and Ireland’s 2002 plastic bag tax also have been implemented.

Labeling and standards among governments and businesses are used to educate consumers and shape their buying habits. Since 1988 Canada has used the voluntary EcoLogo program to distinguish products and services according to their environmental impacts. Governments also use mandatory labeling to influence the market. To reduce eutrophication in lakes and seas Sweden introduced a bill to ban retail sales of laundry powders and dishwashing detergents containing phosphates. China introduced the Energy Label, which mandates efficiency labeling on products such as air conditioners, household refrigerators, clothes washers, and unitary air conditioners. More recent developments include attempts to change consumer lifestyles through the design of communities and cities. United Arab Emirates is currently building Masdar city as the world’s first zero-waste, zero-carbon, and car-free city. The city will generate its own renewable energy, and house approximately 50,000 people and 1,500 businesses. Other planned sustainable communities include Barangaroo in Australia, Panyu Jinshan in China, and Mata de Sesimbra in Portugal (UNDESA 2010).

The strategies that emerged from the Marrakech Process are criticized by scholars who see potential in Agenda 21 for altering deeper meanings of consumer lifestyles and our relationship to the global economy. Scholars such as Maurie Cohen (2001; 2010), Tim Jackson (2006), and Gill Seyfang (2009) are among those who argue that sustainable consumption has been too narrowly cast into an eco-efficiency mold that privileges the use of technical fixes to help us consume more efficiently in the marketplace. Jackson notes such improvements do not curb the growth in consumption but actually encourage it, which is confirmed by historical evidence that shows increases in scale have undermined eco-efficiency efforts. Eco-efficiency also hinges upon a neo-classical view of markets and the consumer, which approaches all consumption as an activity to increase the utility or well being of individual consumers. As Seyfang argues, approaches that merely target the consumer are problematic because consumer lifestyles are embedded in social institutions and socio-technical regimes that are inconspicuous and shape consumption at the level of habit. However, socio-technical regimes are themselves enmeshed in geopolitical concerns. According to Cohen, the US is a “debtor empire” that relies on consumer-citizens to purchase surplus goods from allied countries in exchange for global dominance. Thus, material throughput is dependent upon US interests, and for any form of consumption to become sustainable, trade relations and global empire will need to be confronted. In sum, these critiques suggest the need for both structural and collective measures if we are to create substantive shifts towards more sustainable and equitable futures.

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