Government initiatives to use SCP as an active policy framework

Developing a national SCP programme

In the UK, the environment ministry is building evidence and action programmes around the principles of Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP). This framework is a blueprint for coherent, well-managed actions by public authorities.
By Bob Ryder

Soon after the commitments on sustainable consumption and production (SCP) at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, the United Kingdom (UK) government decided to develop a framework of national activity on SCP.

The rationale for this was set out in an innovative report, Changing Patterns – the UK Government Framework for Sustainable Consumption and Production (Defra 2003). This emphasised the need to reform current trends of consumption and production, which are beyond the planet's capacity to absorb pollution and provide natural resources. It established the policy aim of decoupling, that is, breaking the link between economic growth and environmental degradation. It was a joint publication by the ministries covering the environment, enterprise and innovation. From the start, therefore, policy on SCP has involved a close cooperation between the environment and economic departments of state.

An overall programme for SCP

The rationale was developed further and described in the UK Sustainable Development Strategy (UK Government 2005). The key chapter on SCP has the title One-Planet Economy, which gives a good indication of the direction of thinking. But the strategy was also concerned to show how the SCP agenda would be taken forward in practice. It set out how actions should in future be mobilised around the three main themes production, products and consumption patterns.

A significant feature of this strategy is the central importance given to products, as the essential medium through which the economic activities of production and consumption are conducted. This has continued to be a strong theme in UK policy since 2005. It is of course also a feature of the European Commission's action plan on SCP at EU level, which was published in July 2008.

Since 2005, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has been working to bring together and coordinate the many separate activities and projects which can contribute to SCP. Since 2007 this has been organised as a priority programme, reporting directly to the Defra Management Board.

The governance of the SCP Programme has a formal structure, with its own Programme Board. This includes members from relevant ministries and from related government programmes. The work is organised into a number of workstreams, operating under the same framework of programme and project management. The rest of this article outlines the main workstreams.

An evidence-based approach

Work on evidence and research supports the whole direction of the SCP Programme (Defra 2008a). There is a strong ethic that all policies developed on SCP in the UK should be soundly based on evidence and, in particular, whole life-cycle thinking.

Essentially, the SCP evidence programme is about improving the ways we can measure and address the impacts of consumption and production. The measurement theme includes work on cross-cutting tools such as ecological footprinting, material-flow analysis, life-cycle assessment and indicators for SCP; and also on more specific tools such as developing methodologies for measuring the carbon footprint of products across their whole life-cycle. Other research work supports the thematic areas of sustainable products and materials, business and the environment, and the understanding of consumption behaviour and how it can be influenced.

The philosophy behind this work is that good evidence both enables and helps to drive improvement, so the intention is to share the results widely with stakeholders and decision-makers in the UK and beyond.

Better at meeting consumer needs

In 2007, as part of its increased emphasis on product-related work, Defra set up a new Sustainable Products and Materials Unit to concentrate on products, materials and services. A report published in July 2008 has set out not only the progress made so far in the UK, but also some good indications of a future vision of product sustainability and priorities for action (Defra 2008b).

A significant part of the work on products has been on products which consume energy in use. The UK has been buil- ➜

ding up knowledge and action programmes in this area for about fifteen years, through its Market Transformation Programme (Defra 2008c). This will continue to be a key area of activity, with an ambitious work programme at EU level under the framework directive which governs this family of products.

However, the UK has been keen to use the long experience of working with energy-using products in order to address a wider set of product types. By addressing various product types it was also possible to address a wider range of environmental impacts. This approach is being piloted in a number of product areas which have significant impacts at various stages of their life-cycle. A roadmap approach has been developed around a sharing of evidence with key stakeholders, identifying improvement opportunities and agreeing commitments across government and business (Defra 2008d).

Resource-efficient and competitive

The 2008 report also sets out how a range of possible policy interventions are being shaped, to prompt dynamic shifts in the environmental performance of products in the market. The aim is to make progress across the whole of the market, incentivising innovation for more sustainable products, moving the bulk of the market towards the standard of the best, and removing the worst-performing products. Some key areas being developed are the use of better product information, which allows standards of green performance to be specified at minimum and best-practice levels; and tools such as the use of these specifications in public procurement, which exerts a direct influence on the market.

The work programme relating to sustainable business covers a variety of activities (Defra 2008e). Some are concerned with the tools and frameworks which can be used by businesses and other organisations wishing to become more sustainable, for example, in the fields of corporate responsibility, reporting and disclosure, and management systems. There are also several funded programmes, through which Defra's agents work with businesses to promote greater resource efficiency and to reduce waste and emissions. Key examples are Envirowise which provides resource-efficiency advice, the Carbon Trust which advises on energy-efficiency, WRAP which works on market development for recycled materials, and the National Industrial Symbiosis Programme which identifies cross-sector opportunities for exchanging materials, ecological assets, logistics and expertise.

Understanding and influencing behaviour

An important new area of work is in stimulating eco-innovation in order to seize the economic opportunities in moving towards a low-carbon, resource-efficient economy. The UK's Commission on Environmental Markets and Economic Performance has made many recommendations in this area which are now being taken forward (Defra 2008f).

For several years, Defra has been working to develop a much more sophisticated picture of what motivates consumption behaviour. This work has recently been published as a Framework for Pro-Environmental Behaviours (Defra 2008g). The Framework draws on the evidence to set out a new approach towards citizen engagement, which will guide future work on sustainable consumption in the UK. Important features of this approach are the prioritisation of a set of key environmental behaviours and a model of segmentation. Together these will be used to target specific behaviours in specific segments of the population.

Conclusion

The wide-ranging nature of the SCP agenda poses a difficult challenge to public authorities, if they are to organise their activities in a coherent, well-managed way. The UK has made a start in developing what the World Summit for Social Development called a framework of programmes for SCP. But much of the work is still developing and there is no doubt the framework will need to evolve further.

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