

Innovative approaches to promote sustainable consumption

Why do we need a policy to deal with sustainable consumption?

Current policy instruments are mostly addressing the production and only seldom the consumption of products. Furthermore, the existing policy measures related to consumers are frequently restricted to information. But information is not sufficient to change people's behavior.

By Gerd Scholl, Frieder Rubik, Harri Kalimo and Eivind Stø

Environmental policies have had some success in reducing environmental burdens; the early production oriented policies aimed at improving the state of environmental media (1). These have later been supplemented by policies under the headline of Integrated Product Policy. But until now, the success of consumption-oriented sustainability policies is limited: "(...) the general trend is an increase of environmental pressures because consumption growth is outweighing gains made through improvements in technology. The reasons seem not to be a lack of activity, but a lack of integration and cohesion within public policy and also a focus on the supply side of markets in the programmes" (EEA 2005: 14).

What has happened so far?

Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) has been on the international agenda since the early 1990s. At the World Summit of Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 all participating countries committed themselves to promote the elaboration of a 10-year framework of programs on SCP. International activities began in 2003 at a First International Expert Meeting held in Marrakech. The intention of the Marrakech process was to jointly develop the framework of SCP programs. European activities in SCP began some years ago on the basis of the experiences in, for example, Integrated Product Policy (see Szlezak et al. in this issue). The European Commission is going to publish an Action Plan on SCP in summer 2008.

The project "Assessing the potential of various instruments for sustainable consumption practices and greening of the market" (ASCEE) is funded within the EU's sixth Framework Research Programme and will be finalised by autumn 2008. It aims to identify latest trends in public policies promoting sustainable consumption and to indicate key elements of how policies should be designed to be more effective. The particular focus of

the project is on innovative instruments, approaches and policy practices.

Based on an instrumental overview, informed by document analysis and 80 expert interviews all over Europe, we have distinguished three themes in SCP. Within each of these three themes, three exemplary cases were analysed: product panels, technology procurement and the Dutch Green Funds Scheme were examples for greening of the market, TopTen, the UK campaign "We're in this together" and the UK Red/Green Calculator illustrate the theme making sustainable consumption easy, and with regard to increasing consumer awareness the Danish campaign "One tonne less", a new generation of eco teams and organic labels were dealt with.

From Production-Related to Consumption-Related Policies

Current priorities of government intervention address the supply side and only few measures are taken that put the consumers centre stage. The policy measures directly related to consumers are often confined to the provision of information. But information is not sufficient to change people's behavior. Everyday consumption practices are strongly driven by habit and context (see Spargaaren in this issue). Hence, in order to achieve substantial and durable alterations in consumer lifestyles, a more far reaching or different kind of intervention is needed, one that systematically develops an ability to consume in a more sustainable fashion as well as generating further opportunities for greener consumption. In this perspective, important approaches are creating an infrastructure that supports sustainable choices.

As it appears from our research current European policies have not yet sufficiently reflected this extended scope of intervention. A more explicit consideration of these aspects is required. In particular, taking into account the fact that efficiency gains are often offset by an increase of the absolute amount of consumption a re-consideration of the sufficiency paradigm might be required (Hertwich 2005).

Design of Sustainable Consumption Policy

Sustainable consumption (SC) policy is located between classical regulatory government policies and new, multi-stakeholder-based governance approaches mobilising the potential of civil society. For example, the Danish product panels are a cooperative approach and embedded in the Danish strategy of

a new triangle connecting market, policy and stakeholder perspective. In this case co-operation does not mean, however, a retirement of policy. Governmental authorities nominate the chair of each product panel, they fund operative work and projects agreed within the panel, and they participate at the panel meetings, at least as observers. The involved actors were aware that they could influence policy developments. But at the same time policy makers signalled that they could act if the panel approaches would fail.

Hence, a shadow of hierarchy remains visible and this is for good reason, since policy makers must not completely outsource politics (Barber et al. 2008). This refers, amongst others, to the indication of targets that serve as benchmarks informing and instructing the public.

Role of Stakeholders

The success of SC policies is to a large extent dependent on the involvement of all strategic stakeholder groups. This does not imply, however, that one should encourage action by as many stakeholders as possible. Rather the challenge is to integrate the right stakeholders at the right point of policy formulation and implementation. While public authorities per definition have a major role to play, alongside manufacturers and their associations and consumer and environmental non-governmental organisations, retailers seem to gain importance as gate-keepers to greener products.

The retailing sector is in a key position. "It informs the end-user about product features (...) [and] in its position as purchaser and customer it can dictate the conditions of supply" (Sarasin 2006: 5). Thus, it should be paid special attention to when it comes to the allocation of responsibilities among the value chain actors (NCC 2007, SDC 2008).

What's New in Consumption Policies?

Not surprisingly, first-order innovations, for instance the invention of an instrument which is completely new to SC policy, were not found very often. The UK Red/Green Calculator, which provides retailers and manufacturers with a means of assessing, on a voluntary basis, the energy efficiency of consumer electronic products that they procure and sell, can be regarded as an example for this innovation.

Second-order innovations, for instance an innovation that occurs when a policy instrument is new to a specific application context, was encountered very often. Examples are the diffusion of the TopTen internet platform from Switzerland to other European countries, the uptake of Green Public Procurement by Portugal where the purchasing potential of public administration had not been utilised extensively for sustainability purposes before a National Action Plan on Green Public Procurement was implemented, the introduction of a congestion charge in Stockholm following the London pilot project. Nevertheless, we identified novel elements with respect to modern SC policies.

„Policies still mainly address the environmental problems of consumption while the social dimension of consumption patterns remains omitted.“

Collectivity is Key: Some campaigns, for example "We're in this Together", place strong emphasis on community-building among stakeholders and particularly among consumers. By so doing, they follow the fundamental idea of "creating a supportive framework for collective progress, rather than exhorting individuals to go against the grain", as it has been formulated in the UK "I will if you will" report (SDC/NCC 2006). One may overcome motivational barriers of consumers by organising real or virtual peer groups within which people can demonstrate that change in everyday life is actually feasible and within which they are provided with opportunities to lead by good example.

Adaptability is crucial: Modern SC policy instruments have to cope with shorter innovation cycles and accelerated market pace. Consumption areas characterised by this phenomenon are, for instance, consumer electronics and information technology, passenger cars, and, probably to a smaller extent, household goods such as washing machines, dish washers or cold appliances. Obviously, in these areas an instrument such as classical eco-labelling schemes is increasingly incapable of keeping up with rapidly progressing product developments. An instrument such as the Topten information platform is more flexible in this respect. The need to adapt policy instruments to altered market circumstances will be a continuing challenge assuming that product innovation remains a major force in saturated consumer goods markets.

A solid evidence base is essential: Scientific evidence has traditionally played a role in environmental policy formulation, for example, in clarifying the environmental performance of one-way versus returnable packaging. Also today a sound evidence base appears to be a major success factor for current SC policies. What has changed, however, is the thematic scope of the evidence required for proper policy design. In some of the approaches studied in the ASCEE project the information comprises not only technical and life cycle assessment data, but also evidence from social sciences referring to issues such as consumer values and attitudes, heterogeneity of consumer groups or barriers for change in everyday life. Public policies to promote sustainable consumption should pay more attention to the generation and exchange of data that helps to come up with policy tools better fitting everyday lives of consumers.

The social dimension as new element

One could also additionally envisage a more explicit consideration of the social dimension of sustainability. Our over- →

view reveals, however, that this is not the case yet. Policies still mainly address the environmental problems of consumption while the social dimension of consumption patterns, such as the working conditions in upstream stages of the product life cycle, have not yet been captured to the same extent. Policy approaches integrating the environmental and social dimensions of sustainability are encountered, for instance, in labelling instruments. In addition, the issue of ethical consumption and fair trade is sometimes a matter of public information and education campaigns. But until now a more binding consideration of social issues in policy design, for example in procurement guidelines, is not established yet.

Policy Recommendations

To promote sustainable consumption, we have identified some preliminary recommendations.

Take multiple roles when designing and implementing a policy to promote sustainable consumption.

The greening of consumption cannot be a task of consumers alone: a sustainable consumption policy is needed. The traditional top-down regulatory policy is necessary to give a clear framework orientation. This should be combined with more innovative modes of public-private governance, for example by networking or by involvement of stakeholders, which supplement regulatory policy. Governments should be flexible and adjust their role to the different situations in an iterative process of policy formulation and implementation.

Design and support a sustainable consumption policy that activates relevant stakeholders in business and civil society.

The success of SC policies is to a large degree dependent on the involvement of all strategic stakeholder groups. Which stakeholders are indeed relevant depends on the objective and the context of the instruments considered. Besides the manufacturers, it is the retailers as the gate keepers to greener products and the information providers to consumers who deserve more attention during policy formulation and implementation. Other key groups such as architects, electricians or plumbers can play an important role in educating and influencing consumers. In addition, environmental and consumer non-governmental organisations have an important role to play in raising consumer awareness and providing independent advice on the numerous sustainability issues associated with consumption patterns.

Find appropriate forms of institutionalisation for the SC policy.

There are different elements to give shape to a policy aiming to foster more sustainable consumption patterns. One may set up dedicated programmes containing policy objectives and policy instruments, one may impose an appropriate legal framework, or one may closely link sustainable consumption-oriented policies to the national strategy on sustainable development. Moreover, sustainable consumption policy is a cross-cutting issue and, hence, should be integrated in related policy fields, such as consumer policy, urban planning, development policy, tax policy, etc. Finding a responsible administrative unit in char-

ge of this issue is another core element of institutionalisation. All options have their pros and cons. But without any institutionalisation, policy initiatives might suffer from a lack of visibility and fail to activate relevant stakeholders.

Try to exploit the full potential of more sustainable consumption patterns.

Improving the overall environmental performance of products and greening current consumer goods markets via strategies such as choice editing, that is taking the most environment-damaging products off the retailers' shelves or improving standards for all products, is an essential element of any policy to promote sustainable consumption. It may neglect, however, that efficiency gains can be offset by a growth in demand. And it may hide huge sustainability potential contained in the way products and services are used in everyday lives. Effective SC policies will strongly benefit from addressing issues that are beyond the supply side and efficiency improvements and that more explicitly address use patterns and consumption levels.

Develop, support and use instruments with high built-in adaptability in areas of rapid technological progress.

Rapid technological advance is a major feature of many consumer goods markets. This observation may apply not only to electrical and electronic goods, but also to non energy-using products such as cleaning products with fast changing formulations or clothing from varying fabrics. Classical policy instruments, such as obligatory efficiency labelling or voluntary eco-labelling, are increasingly incapable of coping with the accelerated market dynamics. Hence, a dynamisation of requirements and a shortening of revision cycles becomes a crucial success factor for a policy that is to stimulate innovation and to help consumers make better choices. Public-private-partnerships to establish information platforms presenting the best-in-class for different product groups may be an additional way to meet this challenge. It is important to provide incentives for manufacturers on the leading edge of technological innovation to continue their efforts and at the same time provide stringent requirements that catch laggards.

Seek an instrumental design that provides a sense of community, social feedback and practical solutions.

Policy should create a framework which is supportive to collective progress and which contributes to mainstreaming sustainable consumption patterns. One way to achieve this is building real or virtual communities, for example around public information campaigns or eco-labelling schemes, within which people can learn and demonstrate that change in everyday life is actually feasible and worthwhile and within which they can give and receive feedback to and from their partners-in-crime. SC policy could learn from marketing techniques by developing so-called social marketing strategies.

Create a sound evidence-base for policy design connecting life-cycle and market data with socio-economic information.

Scientific evidence traditionally played a role in environmental policy formulation. This is, for example, the domain of life-cycle-assessment-studies. Such tools are based on technical, hard

data not considering the challenges of consumption like different consumer segments or heterogeneous consumption patterns. Also today a sound evidence base is important, but the thematic scope of the evidence required for proper policy design has changed. Evidence from social sciences which refers to issues such as consumer values and attitudes, heterogeneity of consumer groups or barriers for change in everyday life is needed to be able to design effective sustainable consumption policy and its instruments.

Monitor and assess policy impacts as part of a continuous improvement process.

Public authorities should assess ex-ante sustainable consumption instruments. This could provide first and preliminary insights on the potential impacts of an instrument and contribute to better policy-making and increase the legitimacy of the planned instruments. A periodical monitoring is necessary to judge the degree of goal achievement, and to correct mismatches of policy formulation and implementation.

Annotations

Parts of this contribution have been co-authored by other colleagues of the ASCEE project: Katja Biedenkopf (IES), Franziska Mohaupt (IÖW), Olof Soebech (IES), Pål Strandbakken (SIFO), and Bruno Turnheim (IES).

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Ob Auto, Kleidung oder Lebensmittel: Alles was wir kaufen und konsumieren hat großen Einfluss auf die Umwelt. Wie lässt sich ein nachhaltiger Konsum im Alltag realisieren? Die Autoren betrachten typische Teilbereiche lokaler Agendaprozesse und zeigen, wie im Rahmen einer zukunftsorientierten Stadtentwicklung Hindernisse abgebaut und die persönliche Handlungsbereitschaft der Akteure unterstützt werden kann.

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