EDITORIAL

Is Sustainable Consumption and Production the Core of SDGs?

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"There is a sufficiency in the world for man's need but not for man's greed"

Mahatma Gandhi

In 1992, at Rio Earth Summit, world leaders acknowledged that "the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production (UN, 1992, para 4.3). The central role of sustainable consumption and production (SCP) towards sustainable development was reaffirmed at the World Summits for Sustainable Development: in 2002, SCP was declared as one of the overarching objectives, and at Rio+20, the Global 10-year framework of programs (10YFP) was launched. This shows that SCP has had a consistently strong recognition and support at the highest political level and has been embedded at the core of achieving sustainable development. In the development of sustainable development goals (SDGs), sustainable consumption and production were formulated as a separate goal (see Goal 12: Responsible consumption and production). Is it enough? There are discussions among key stakeholders that SCP should be reflected in many SDGs, perhaps even playing a central role in the Agenda 2030.

We have to admit that some progress has been made in measuring and modelling the environment impact of consumption in general. To some degree, a shift from consumption as an economic and material category to consumers as economic and political actors is recognised. But results that the environmental impact of consumption in many areas has increased in spite of substantial technical innovations show that due to the so called rebound effect technical improvements only do not solve the problem. Consumers have a decisive part to play in the process towards sustainability not only their role as classical consumers, but also in their role as political consumers or citizens/voters.

The conventional economy depends on consumption, which is based on the assumption that people are inherently selfish and this self-interest leads society towards the greater good. In fact, selfishness clearly exists but, undeniably, altruism exists too. Both kinds of behaviours are genetically possible in us and both had evolutionary advantages over long periods of time. Selfishness has served us well under conditions of fight or flight, bur altruism has been fundamental to our evolution as social beings. We are not and have never been entirely the selfish hedonists that consumer capitalism expects and needs us to be (Jackson, 2017).

Four distinct economic innovations – the nature of enterprise, the value of work, the structure of investments and the role of money – provide solid foundation

for economy of tomorrow. The transition from unfettered consumerism to sustainable prosperity is a precise, definable and meaningful task for which other actors at the macro level in the market and politics are of decisive importance, too (Jackson, 2017). Thus, we need a movement from the micro to macro level, and simultaneously, a development from the market into politics.

The decoupling of economic growth from resource use and environmental degradation has often been promoted as one of the key means of achieving sustainable consumption and production. But in reality, after more than two decades of international policy discussions on sustainability, there have been only a few examples achieving relative decoupling, when material consumption and associated environmental pressure grow at less rapid rates than economies. At the same time, there are no examples of absolute decoupling, which is necessary to achieve sustainability. Thus, the decoupling approach remains largely theoretical, based on questionable assumptions, for example, of rapid technological progress with limited undesirable side effects in the form of rebound mentioned above. Besides that, decoupling gives primacy to the economic dimension, because it is based on the assumption that economic growth can and should continue, seemingly ad infinitum, and it does therefore in practice assign a secondary role to other sustainability objectives (Akenji and Bengtsson, 2013).

The economic system should strive for efficiency, equity and poverty reduction, but at the same time account for the impacts on biological productivity, biodiversity and ecological resilience as well as the implications for social justice, good governance and social stability. The general objective of sustainable economic development, then, is to maximize the goals across these systems through an adaptive process of trade-offs (Barbier and Burgess, 2017). The main problem in seeking trade-offs is disagreement on natural capital has it an essential role in sustaining human welfare or there is no difference between natural and other forms of capital. The weak sustainability approach assumes that there is no difference; in contrast, strong sustainability argues that natural capital (unique environments, ecosystems, biodiversity and life-supporting systems) is essential. However, in practice, development decisions by governments, business and other actors do allow trade-offs and put the greatest emphasis on the economy above other dimensions of sustainability. This is a major reason why the environment continues to be degraded and development does not achieve desirable equity goals. That is why the three sustainability "pillars" (economic, environmental, and social) cannot be treated as if equivalent.

Eco-innovations, eco-efficiency and corporate social responsibility are important for unsustainability reduction in enterprises, but for sustainable consumption and production there is a need for transformative changes to achieve long-term social and environmental sustainability. The features of a route towards sustainability might be:

- A system that encourages minimising of consumption, or imposes personal and institutional caps or quotas on energy, goods, water, etc.;
- A system designed to maximise societal and environmental benefit, rather than prioritising economic growth;
- A closed-loop system where nothing is allowed to be wasted or discarded into environment, which reuses, and remakes in preference to recycling;
- A system that emphasises delivery of functionality and experience, rather than product ownership;
- A system designated to provide fulfilling, rewarding work experiences for all that enhances human creativity/skills;
- A system built on collaboration and sharing, rather than aggressive competition (Bocken et al., 2014).

Sustainable consumption and production are reflected as a cross-cutting topic in a several UN documents and are often highlighted in sustainability initiatives for a broad range of sectors and issues. In other words, the patterns of consumption and production determine the degree of sustainability in many areas, for instance, energy production is related to CO2 emissions; industrial pollution affects water, air and soil quality; wood production and mining could lead to desertification and land degradation; gender equality and education are linked to access to resources and better quality of life, etc. In this situation, the analysis

based on the system approach could make an important contribution to SDGs by emphasising that they are interlinked and that progress solely focused on one goal could have consequences for the other. One surprising outcome of such analysis is that reducing poverty over 2000–2015 may have come at the expense of making our economy less sustainable (Barbier and Burgess, 2017).

Economic activities need to provide the capabilities for people to flourish in their community, socially and psychologically as well as materially. At the same time, these activities must provide decent satisfying lively hoods for people. Therefore, economic activity must be low in carbon, efficient in resource use and "tread lightly" on the earth (Jackson, 2017). This clearly shows that sustainable consumption and production is not as a standalone goal but embeds it in other relevant issues: it could fall under goals as no poverty and hunger, food and energy security, biodiversity protection, clean water, industry, innovation and infrastructure, climate change, good jobs and economic growth, etc., i.e. serving as a cross-cutting theme of the SDGs.

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