

## **The Good Life or the Better Life? Values, Norms and the Sustainable Consumption Transition.** Institutional Orientations as Prerequisites for Sustainable Societies

### **Summary**

For a transition towards sustainability, both production and consumption have to change. In the current public and the political debate, and in economics as well, 'green growth' and the 'green economy' dominate the discourse on the production side, which fits neatly with the claim for 'a better life' on the consumption side. A 'good life', questioning not only consumption patterns but also the prevailing levels of consumption, is associated with the minority discourse on 'degrowth'.

A good life based on substantially sustainable consumption cannot neglect human needs, but needs to identify better satisfiers for them. Three challenges stand out:

- (i) enhancing the satisfaction efficiency of consumer goods,
- (ii) identifying true satisfiers, and
- (iii) changing preferences towards less but better consumption.

Different approaches in economics offer elements for a consumption theory up to the challenges, but have not yet been synthesised. Some steps for doing so are suggested.

### **Extended abstract**

Some scholars claim an increasing recognition of 'the good life' in the discourse on sustainable development, based on philosophical considerations (Fromm, Nussbaum), value change (Inghart) and saturation effects. This may be the case in some circles (see the 'voluntary simplicity' or the LOHAS – lifestyle of health and sustainability groups), but those tend to either be upper middle and lower upper class, small intellectual circles or fringe phenomena of spiritual movements. Sustainable consumption has been – and still is – perceived as the voluntary renunciation of consumption possibilities: an ascetic attitude suitable for niche life styles but not attractive to the public at large, to the mainstream focussed on and believing in ever increasing consumption. However, under the currently hegemonic political and cultural paradigm of (economic) growth, a vision prevails promising unlimited satisfaction of all (existing, emerging or engineered) human wants, either soon or in a slightly more distant future.

The majority of proponents for sustainable development as well as for sustainable consumption opposes this trend and demands 'changing consumption patterns' to minimise the ecological (less frequent, also the social) footprint of the prevailing consumption patterns. This 'new frugality' has in the meantime also been discovered by business as a viable innovation strategy in the time of rising resource prices (since the beginning of the century they have increased enough – despite all volatility – to compensate for the continuous decrease of the last century). This approach of pursuing 'the better life' fits well to the 'Green Economy Transition', a remake of the 1970s/1990s ecological modernisation strategy, and its objective of 'green growth'.

Since the days of Brundtland and carried on in the most cited definition of sustainable consumption from the Oslo Symposium 1994 this 'better life' is continuously carried forward like a mantra. Without any doubt the 'better life' is necessary for those suffering in poverty. Permanently promising 'a better life' to the members of the consumer society – and, even worse, doing it in the name of sustainability – seems quite contradictive, however. While 'the good life' indicates elements of stability as well as of contentedness the search for the 'better life' necessarily included repine. There is always something more and different to strive for, so that despite the similarity of names the 'better

life' is in fact is something completely different than the 'good life'. The latter includes questioning not only the patterns, but the level of consumption, and with it the underlying value system, in particular in the context of sustainable development.

We see two elements as predominant for the ongoing dominance of 'the better life' over the 'good life'. First are indeed the power structures in society and especially media which constantly tell us that 'happiness is around the corner' if we only buy this or that new product. Proponents strictly sustain the orientation towards increasing consumption (the primacy of economic growth), only replacing certain consumer goods by more sustainable alternatives – and all too often not even in a life cycle perspective. The second reason is that even those who in general see the advantages of 'the good life' do not manage so far to really sell the concept. It is more under the suspicion of suffering than representing a hope for true richness. This paper contributes to the discussion how the vision of a 'good life' could look like and how to make it appealing:

The first element of how consumers can derive more satisfaction from less goods is through the efficient provision of access to flows of goods and services, with an emphasis on the important role of non-market goods, often collectively owned (individually, by cooperatives, or public authorities), as an important corollary (macro level supply optimisation).

The second element is carefully screening which products and services are real satisfiers of human needs, which are pseudo-satisfiers or even toxic satisfiers (Max-Neef et al.). Many 'real satisfiers' may not be commodities or commercial services at all. Sustainable consumption is then not fulfilling all human needs (which makes the good life), but doing so by choosing environmentally, socially and psychologically sane satisfiers (micro level consumption pattern optimisation).

The third element would be a change in consumer attitude towards consuming better but less. Institutions (orientations/norms and mechanisms) are needed enabling and facilitating purchasing higher quality consumer goods, reducing consumption while improving service availability. Loans and savings, cooperative banks etc. should begin to think about such grant schemes in the medium term, while public institutions could begin by honouring career advances by better, not larger cars, offices etc (institutional micro level demand limitation). Better goods are rightfully more expensive, so that "better but less" implies that hardly any money is saved, thus avoiding the rebound effect and Jevons' paradox.

As current welfare theory must be considered failed, a new approach is need also in economics. One candidate is the concept of psychic income (Fisher 1906). The capacity approach introduced by Sen and Nussbaum which also considers the good life might play a role in it, while the modern happiness research (popular since Layard) often asks the wrong questions. Inspired by neoclassical thinking, the focus is on individual happiness instead of asking "what keeps you from being happy?" in order to identify those factors which fall into the competence and responsibility of politics and administration, and keep limitations to state interference (sustainable consumption is neither a free market program nor a Leviathan strategy). Instead sufficiency policy, a social-ethics grounding of decision making (a deontological ethics), elements from happiness research and new insights from old indigenous ethics (Sumak kawsay/Kichwa, buen vivir) can contribute elements to a new economics world view. One core element is questioning so far apparently self-legitimising, unquestionable orientations like the one for economic growth, and promoting reflection about reflexivity (Beck): 'love for wisdom' is the literal translation of Greek 'φιλοσοφία' and Latin 'philosophia', and as E. F. Schumacher said "we have become far too clever to survive without wisdom"