

Rethinking the role of individuals' behaviours in sustainable consumption

Consumption continues to rise, with increasing environmental impacts. What societal changes could help to reverse this and how might change be effected by policymakers and businesses?



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The Living With Environmental Change Partnership brings together 22 public sector organisations that fund, carry out and use environmental research and observations. They include the UK research councils, government departments with environmental responsibilities, devolved administrations and government agencies. The private sector is represented by a Business Advisory Board.

Although in the Global North emissions from the industrial sector have fallen in absolute terms, overall CO₂ emissions continue to rise and a growing proportion of environmental impacts can be related, either directly or indirectly, to consumption by private households. Consequently, policy has come increasingly to focus on individual behaviours and consumer choices with, as yet, limited success. This is because escalating environmental impacts are caused by production-consumption systems rather than the total sum of choices made by individuals, and these systems must be addressed if we are to achieve effective change.

What approaches have been tried in the past?

When policymakers look to "behaviour change" they usually focus on:

- Pricing — either through incentives or penalties.
- Providing information - so consumers can make more informed choices, such as through product labelling.
- Shifting values and attitudes - through social marketing campaigns.
- Breaking habits - seeking to intervene in "unsustainable" habits and steering individuals toward more sustainable ones.

What assumptions lie behind these approaches?

These conventional responses frame the problem primarily as one of individuals' capacity to exercise choices, and of the barriers - attitudinal, contextual and technical - to those choices. They tend to assume that:

- Consumption means the act of purchase and equates to discretionary individual choices.
- Behaviour is driven by a more or less stable portfolio of values and attitudes, which individuals select from in order to make discrete choices.
- Acts of consumption are goal-driven - often in relation to conspicuous consumption and materialistic values rather than pro-environmental ones.
- Some individual behaviours are automated and guided, or triggered by, environmental cues, and that changing these cues (eg default "opt ins" to pensions) can nudge habitual behaviours in more sustainable directions.

How could a different approach help?

An alternative approach focuses on the social organisation of consumption. Consumption is best understood as occurring through the pursuit of social practices that:

- Make up everyday life - eg showering, doing the laundry, cooking or driving - and involve what we might call the inconspicuous consumption of resources.
- Individuals have degrees of choice in how they perform, but at the same time individual autonomy is constrained by infrastructures, institutions and access to resources (economic, social, cultural).
- Are shared - most practices are performed with others or in the same ways as others.
- Are interconnected - food shopping connects to practices of eating, driving, socialising, and so on.
- Are socially ordered phenomena - their performance entails cultural conventions, shared meanings, social norms and rules, as well as common technologies and infrastructures.
- Are dynamic - continually changing and co-evolving with infrastructures, technologies, and culture.

How do we shift everyday practices to be more sustainable?

Social practices should be placed at the centre stage of analysis and intervention, in order to affect societal patterns of consumption. This requires a focus on two fundamental principles for understanding practices.

First, as practices are shared and interconnected, we need to look beyond specific instances of individual behaviour to instead focus on the ways that practices are organised, for example:

Laundry – attempts to render laundry behaviours more sustainable have focused on technological efficiencies and encouraging low temperature washing. However:

- Overall energy and water consumption from laundry continues to rise (accounting for 12% and 13% respectively of total UK household consumption).
- The major trend is the rise in number of loads per person (and household) coupled with growing use of tumble dryers.
- The majority of loads happen between 7 and 11 am, with tumble dryers running later in the day.
- Millions of machines operate at similar times to service a (highly gendered) practice that survey respondents overwhelmingly dislike doing.
- The scope for re-organising this practice – eg collective laundry services – to achieve economies of scale is significant, but will not be achieved by appealing to individuals to adopt incrementally a more efficient version of current practice.

Eating – approaches to food consumption are dominated by the domestic meal: with advice on what to select in order to construct that meal. However:

- The sustainability challenge for food consumption is not just about the ingredients, but also the energy embedded in journeys to supermarkets, refrigeration and cooking.
- The major trend in UK diets is eating out and this may be a better target to deliver sustainability benefits unavailable in the home, eg accreditation for energy efficiency or regulation addressing catering food waste.
- Beyond the meal itself are potential innovations in eating and shopping patterns that could deliver sustainability benefits, such as the trend for home shopping deliveries.

Second, because practices are socially ordered and dynamic, taking full account of their trajectories of change is critical:

Keeping Cool – use of air conditioning in the UK is rising fast:

- Demand is not fuelled by private households but workplaces, hospitals and hotels, where air-conditioning is necessary to regulate the temperature of computers and medical equipment, and to meet the expectations of foreign travellers.
- There is a trend in such premises for standardisation of indoor temperatures toward 22°C – with heating and cooling regulating that temperature.

Zero Carbon Homes – the UK's Code for Sustainable Homes was designed around current ways of life and incremental technological shifts toward making those lives more efficient. However:

- The practices of which those daily lives consist are changing.
- Assumptions risk reinforcing and reproducing practices that are inherently unsustainable.

How can policymakers and businesses understand the practices that make up resource-intensive forms of consumption?

Reducing consumption to individuals' behaviour misses much of the point: if we want to tackle resource-intensive forms of consumption then we need to understand the ever-changing practices that make up daily life. This requires:

— **Visions for the future organisation of practices.**

Businesses, Government and NGOs play a fundamental role in "making" and "reproducing" practices. Identifying pathways to achieve shared visions of future practices can produce significant behavioural changes. For example, in Finland, the provision of workplace lunches helped shift diets and contribute to reduced levels of heart disease.

— **Recognition of, and advocacy for, distributed responsibility.**

Multiple actors across production-consumption systems need to come together to address systemic effects – not least because where sustainability impacts occur is not necessarily where causes and drivers are best sought. For example, UK supermarkets have recognised that sales promotions (Buy One Get One

Free) and fresh produce portion size effect food waste, and have changed their marketing practices accordingly.

— **Understanding the trajectories of practices** (rather than purchases) in order to identify alternative pathways for their development. Crucially, focus needs to be on avoiding the development of new unsustainable practices as much as changing current unsustainable ones. For example, by focusing on workplace practices, the "cool biz" initiative in Japan changed the social norms regarding dress codes and room temperature, making significant energy savings in the process.

— **Embracing the power of culture.** Targeting moments of changing cultural contexts and learning from other (and past) cultures about how their practices are socially organized offers insights into alternative ways to organise everyday social practices. An example is the successful adaptation of the Parisian cycle hire scheme in London.

Further information

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Useful resources:

Sustainable Practices Research Group – www.sprg.ac.uk

Sustainable Consumption Institute – www.sci.manchester.ac.uk

DEMAND Research Centre – www.demand.ac.uk

Geels, F.W., McMeekin, A., Mylan, J. & Southerton, D. (2015) "A critical appraisal of Sustainable Consumption and Production research: The reformist, revolutionary and reconfiguration positions", *Global Environmental Change*, 34, pp. 1-12.

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For details of specific examples cited see:

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