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Editorial: Perspectives on Sustainable Consumption

The problem of sustainability has received serious attention since the Club of Rome pointed to the limits of growth in 1972 (Meadows, Sanders, Meadows, & Behrens 1972). Addressing ecological, economic and social issues, it is still a major – perhaps the biggest – challenge humanity faces. From the Stockholm Conference in 1972 and the establishment of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) in 1973 to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) adopted by the UN and the Paris agreement on climate change in 2015 the international debate has evolved. Although the concept of sustainability can be traced back to the 18th century, it was the World Conservation Strategy (WCS) that helped the term sustainable development to international prominence in 1980. The WCS described sustainable development mainly as an environmental concept, aiming to sustain the planet's carrying capacity. In its now famous Brundtland Report, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1987) proposed a definition that detached the concept from its environmental focus. According to the WCED, sustainable development has to meet “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987, p. 43). Building on this, a number of conceptions of sustainable development have been proposed, most recently the SDG framework. Indeed, the SDG represent a framework that aims to integrate many facets of sustainable development: first the various ecological, economic, social and, political dimensions of sustainable development, secondly its various geographical levels from global to local, thirdly industrialized, newly industrialized and developing countries, and fourthly both general goals as well as applicable indicators.

For example, SDG 12 refers to responsible consumption and production, but it is only one out of 17 goals to enhance sustainable human well-being on earth. Yet, sustainable consumption is often regarded as the major way how *individuals* can actually *contribute* to sustainable development. As a matter of course, the global challenges linked to sustainable development demand attention by actors from all social levels. This includes the support of individuals in their various roles, such as citizens, consumers, or workers. At the same time, sustainable individual well-being now and in future can be seen as the overarching goal of sustainable development as

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proposed by the WCED. Rephrasing it in the terminology of the capability approach, Sen (2013) defines sustainable development as “development that promotes the capabilities of present people without compromising capabilities of future generations”. He thus appeals to the role of persons not only as consumers whose freedom of choice needs to be respected today – forbidding any conception of sustainability as eco-dictatorship – but also as agents who need to contribute to preserving this freedom for future generations:

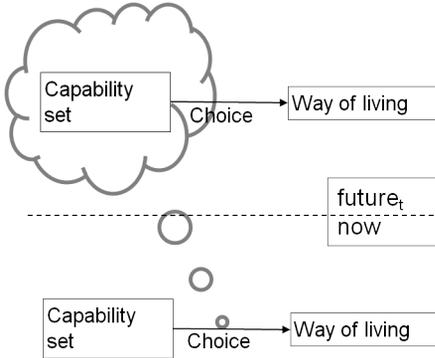


Figure: Sustainable development demands that individuals think about their impact on future capabilities (adapted from (Leßmann & Rauschmayer 2013, p. 99))

This gives rise to a broad definition of sustainable consumption including non-market-based consumption and – not least – non-consumption. The core of sustainable consumption is still the concern for the environment. Thus it may be better called pro-environmental behavior, i.e. behavior that contributes to alleviating environmental problems or at least does not aggravate them. By now a growing number of people are aware that many consumption habits have to be changed because of their negative effects on the environment. Yet, there is a well-documented gap between knowledge and action. Much research has been done in the last 30 years, exploring the motivations, practices, opportunities, and drivers for sustainable consumption from economic, psychological and sociological perspectives. Despite this multidisciplinary efforts and the often interdisciplinary nature of research on sustainable consumption, there is room for broadening the perspectives further.

In particular, the impact of social inequality on sustainable consumption has not gained much attention (Kraemer 2011). Among others, research on the interaction of inequality, issues of employment security and precariousness, political participation and consumption behavior is lacking. The common notion of sustainability includes the idea of a minimum level of consumption to fulfill people's basic needs as a normative demand. It does not, however, always hint to the link between being able to fulfill one's basic needs and participation in society. Similarly, the demand of limiting consumption in order to comply with the planetary boundaries (Rock-

ström et al. 2009) is derived from estimates of natural sciences but lacks a reference to participation in society. The so defined “safe operating space for humanity” indicates threshold levels for nine subsystems of earth which may be specified further for various regional levels in order to monitor current performance, as Meyer et al. (2013) have done for Germany. Yet, how the task of complying with these boundaries shall be achieved and who contributes in which way, remains to be determined.

Blätzel-Mink et al. (2013, p. 37) introduce the idea of consumption corridors and refer to both planetary boundaries and the concern for growing inequality for justifying the idea of lower and upper boundaries for consumption. They suggest social negotiations about these upper and lower limits. The ultimate aim of economic activities and trade should be enabling all people to lead a good life in their view. When putting this proposal forward, Di Giulio and Fuchs (2014) argue for “jointly defin[ing] the external conditions necessary to live a good life” and for “jointly negotiate[ing] maximum consumption standards”. They relate to objective theories of the good life and counter some objections concerning the ethical basis and feasibility of consumption corridors. What is missing in their argument for upper (as well as lower) boundaries of a “safe and just socio-economic space for humanity” is the explicit link to the societal need to restrict social inequality in order to allow participation (Bartelheimer, Drosowski, & Leßmann 2016). While Blätzel-Mink et al. (2013) point to the necessity of social negotiations about the thresholds of consumption and are aware that these will be difficult, they do not discuss social congruence in consumption as a prerequisite for participation (even in these negotiations about consumption boundaries): Neither exclusion by poverty nor withdrawal from their obligations to society by extremely well-off people can provide a democratic basis for the development of visions of a sustainable society. Rather, the transition processes toward sustainability, including the shaping of sustainable production and consumption structures, need to account for issues of social inequality in the participation in such processes – both within and across societies.

This special issue contributes to filling the gap concerning the link between inequality and sustainable consumption in various ways. *Held* and *Haubach* provide a careful empirical study of the additional costs of organic food in Germany based on price surveys. They look at food and non-alcoholic beverages differentiated according to various categories such as meat, fish, dairy products, fruits, vegetables and so on. They further analyze the expenditure according to income deciles. While expenditure structures are fairly similar across income deciles they find evidence of Engel’s law. Hence while income groups are affected the same in absolute terms the relative income share they have to spend for organic food is much higher for low-income households than for richer ones. In consequence, low income households cannot afford to solely buy organic food – they will run into debt.

The empirical analysis of *Masson* and *Leßmann* also looks at the link between purchase of organic food and social inequality in Germany. Rather than interpreting social inequality merely in income terms they are interested in the impact of insecure employment on pro-environmental consumption. Thus, they provide a short survey on the literature on job insecurity and precarity focusing on their negative effect on people's ability to make plans for the future. They find evidence confirming their assumption that employment insecurity lowers people's willingness to engage in costly pro-environmental consumption.

In a related but more specific manner, *Giannini*, *Minervini* and *Scotti* are concerned with insecurity of young Italians induced by the financial crisis. They investigate the impact of this experience on the consumption behavior of the young generation suggesting that the resulting uncertainty may also stimulate the affected to become more reflexive. Indeed, their qualitative research provides evidence for the growing importance of sustainable consumption styles. They distinguish between a selective and a more holistic "distinctive" sustainable consumption pattern. While the Italian contribution explores the impact of the crisis on young people and shows that especially those who hold a university degree tend to reflect on their consumption and become more consciously concerned with sustainability, *Seidel* is interested in the impact of the academic discipline on energy awareness and electricity consumption of students. Based on answers to a questionnaire he finds that of the three disciplines: environmental studies, cultural studies and economics, only students of environmental studies actually turn their energy awareness into actual consumption of renewable energy.

The last contribution tackles the issue of inequality not on a national but on the international level. *Jensen* develops a model for trade policy with respect to infant industries. These industries play a crucial role in furthering innovative technological solutions for sustainable development as the example of the Danish windmill industry illustrates. Hence, the question arises how best to incentivize technological development by trade policy. *Jensen* compares a more traditional system of tariffs with recently employed Research and Development instruments. Assuming that such subsidies will induce industries to learn faster since they are not blocked from competition by tariffs, she also takes the durability of the produced goods into account and finds that standards as a precondition to international trade are the superior trade policy in this case.

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