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Prolog

Sustainable Consumption is not about buying the right products. This is an aspect but it is far from being the main one. Sustainable consumption has to be understood as sustainable lifestyles; sustainable lifestyles for each individual as well as for societies. Sustainable lifestyles should ensure that everyone can live a decent life within the ecological limits. I call this strong sustainable consumption. Even if it might be obvious for this audience it is far from being common sense in the political debates. This is dominated by those believing in economic growth as recipe to cure all ills. They hope new and better technological developments in accordance with green or sustainable consumer procurement will make the difference. This may challenge but do not contradict mainstream thinking. Better technologies and better purchase habits are necessary but still not a sufficient regarding the challenges we face and reflect a weak approach towards sustainable consumption only. What I like to argue for here is to consequently broaden the perspective towards strong sustainable consumption in the sense of sustainable lifestyles. And to make you aware that with insisting in strong sustainable consumption you will face a lot of adverse wind.

Sharpening NGO strategies

Non Governmental Organisations, especially those working on environment, development, and consumer issues, need to distance themselves from addressing consumers merely as consumers, rather than as citizens. To foster acceptance for such policies NGOs have an important, more strategically oriented role to play than they have adopted so far. Increasingly this is a catalyst role, as they don't have massive resources to implement many initiatives themselves. What NGOs can do is bring people together and inspire them. Through the public confidence they enjoy they are in a key position to induce societal debate and awareness regarding the steps needed to reach Strong Sustainable Consumption. Communication and discourse are basic conditions for fostering the changes required. NGOs can hardly be replaced in developing values and visions of Sustainable Consumption and fostering citizen engagement. The more complicated the issue, the more

important it is to take up the catalyst role. Only in this way can politics be brought back to Sustainable Consumption instead of greening the market.

As part of the strategic re-orientation, environmental campaigning has to overcome the habit of promoting Sustainable (in fact green) Consumption by marketing strategies. Instead of encouraging individuals to adopt simple and painless behavioural changes that have highly questionable potential – as has recently been seen with the LOHAS movement (Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability) – an alternative approach to motivate pro-environmental behavioural change is required in order to get people to engage in more significant changes. Such an approach no longer draws on analogies from marketing strategies, but rather from political strategies articulating what it stands for and which values it is driven by. Instead of encouraging individuals to adopt simple and painless behavioural changes that have limited impact, NGOs have to engage in the real issues and talk about the relevant values and promote alternative models of societal organization. Studies have confirmed that an appeal to self-transcendent, intrinsic environmental and social values is more likely to lead to a spill-over into other patterns of behaviour than an appeal to financial self-interest or social status.

Increased political effectiveness also has to grow from improved coalition building by NGOs with other Civil Society Organisations such as academia or trade unions. Experience shows that lobbying efforts are more successful if they bundle various arguments from various groups of society.

Besides backing up each other in content and argumentation, academia can be supportive for NGO engagement in another sense. Scientific efforts can help to improve their effectiveness in pointing out gaps in the strategies that NGOs are using and suggest improvements in detecting ineffective strategies. These aspects are also being pursued by a recent initiative “SMART CSOs”: the development of new narratives emphasizing values and new models of societal organization, the embedding of systems thinking in NGO practice, and the fostering of cross-sectoral collaboration in pursuit of the creation of a new global movement.

Carrot and stick to stimulate the public debate

To open up the debate to a broader audience, including the public as well as policy makers, a two-pronged strategy is necessary: that is, a carrot and stick approach.

The stick in this case is to create a sense of urgency. This means pointing out very clear that reducing consumption is not an option, but is going to come anyway. There are evident ecological limits that we can either actively anticipate or passively allow to overcome us. In any case, limits will substantially harm economic growth. How to ensure a soft landing instead of a hard one solely

depends on the proponents of Strong Sustainable Consumption to get the message across in due time.

As has already been developed for climate change we need clear and scientifically conclusive scenarios about how our lives will be influenced by resource scarcity and especially the peak in oil supply. Those scenarios especially have to highlight the economic and social costs of inaction and the risks for social security from a local to global level.

On this basis, sustainability targets have to be developed regarding how to stay within these ecological limits, including time tables for what to reach by when and who has to contribute what. Research can (only) provide the first step here. Societal agreements on how to act on these recommendations as well as the control over the decisions made are the task of governance processes and thus of governments. Indicators like the Ecological Footprint already point to such a target: restricting the resource use per year to the annual production capacity of the planet. At the moment resources are used up in September already.

The carrot in this case is to better bring to attention that a shrinking of economic processes is not as much a disaster as mainstream economics suggests. Well-being in developed countries has for a long period already been successfully decoupled from economic growth. This needs to be communicated more offensive. Alternative measures of well-being can help to overcome growth addiction. It is important to better highlight other elements of well-being than increasing consumption, like wealth of time being socially connected in the neighbourhood etc.

Utilizing the advantages of multi-level governance

Sustainable Consumption is a typical field where success depends on activities on all levels of governance. The challenge is to ensure a proper exchange between these levels. Coherent positioning and linking is necessary from local to global and back. Ambitious local actions cannot successfully spread out if they are not supported by national and international institutions. The same is with civil society activities and scientific knowledge. As an example may serve the 'occupy wall street' movement, which only with too much delay was supported with solid argumentation by researchers. Thus, timely information about the political processes is as necessary at the grassroots level as a valid pool of examples from local initiatives to inspire national and international work on Sustainable Consumption.

Demanding responsibility of governments in governance

There is ample evidence that hard policies like regulatory instruments and economic instruments are most effective. This includes governments' responsibility to phase out unsustainable consumption options or choice editing as it is called lately. So far most policy instruments focus on information provision.

Another delay in taking action towards Strong Sustainable Consumption is caused by the retreat of government in favour of governance. However, the weakness in implementing the agreements produced by such strategies makes the effort needed for their development rather questionable. Whatever governance processes come up with, control over the follow up and its implementation is the task of governments. They have to ensure that contributions dedicated to specific actors to reach agreed targets are indeed carried out. As long as national governments understand their roles in the governance of Sustainable Consumption as one of providing opportunities for the exchange of opinions and voluntary commitments that are not controlled, a significant drive even towards Weak Sustainable Consumption will fail to materialize.

A lot of energy is needed to bring Strong Sustainable Consumption forward. The motivation for its proponents is that there is no alternative. Lots of efforts have to be taken on multiple levels by multiple actors. All of them are needed as they are the strings which build the rope. However, pulling in the same direction has to be improved.