



# Sustainable consumption within a sustainable economy – beyond green growth and green economies



Sylvia Lorek\*, Joachim H. Spangenberg

*Sustainable Europe Research Institute, Germany*

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 14 September 2012  
Received in revised form  
28 August 2013  
Accepted 31 August 2013  
Available online 14 September 2013

### Keywords:

Strong sustainable consumption  
Green economy  
Green growth  
Sustainable development  
Non-governmental organisations NGOs  
Institutions

## ABSTRACT

In 1992, one unambiguous result of the UNCED conference was the need for changing consumption and production patterns, with affluent countries taking the lead. 20 years later, at the 2012 UNCED, little is left over and instead the “green economy” has been the theme pursued by the OECD, the EU and other countries. So the question needs to be answered if this is finally an attempt to put into practice what was promised 20 years ago, or another diversion from what needs to be accomplished.

Sustainable development is still a convincing concept, if the original definition is taken, avoiding the confusion caused by partisan interests reinterpreting the concept. Focussing on human needs fulfilment and respecting environmental limits, it can still guide strong sustainable consumption. Green economy/green growth, on the other hand, is a new terminology for what is known since 40 years as ecological modernisation. It is indeed overdue, but with its focus on efficiency and innovation it cannot guarantee to fulfil the Brundtland sustainability criteria. A factor analysis based on the  $I = P^*A^*T$  formula demonstrates how optimistic the assumptions regarding future technologies must be to support the green growth concept. Consequently, the authors pledge for a pragmatic, risk avoiding approach by slimming the physical size of the economy. This requires ‘strong sustainable consumption’ (including production as resource consumption), which in turn requires a change of the societies’ institutional settings (formal and informal, mechanisms and orientations).

Finally some elements of a strategy towards this end are pointed out, with special emphasis on the role of non-governmental organisations NGOs. Through networking and advocacy they can both stimulate bottom-up action and mobilise the pressure necessary for the institutional changes which are needed to mainstream strong sustainable consumption.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Sustainable development – still a convincing concept

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

- the concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.”

(WCED, 1987)<sup>1</sup>.

Sustainable development as originally envisioned still is a convincing concept (for a history of the concept see Spangenberg, 2008; Grober, 2012). In its ‘Brundtland definition’ (WCED, 1987) it provides the two clear criteria for sustainable development which are also applicable to sustainable consumption.<sup>2</sup> An economy is sustainable only if it simultaneously caters human needs, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, and accepts the limitations imposed by the need to sustain the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs. In other words: not meeting the needs (not the wants!) of humans is socially unsustainable and consuming resources beyond the environment’s carrying capacity is environmentally unsustainable. As essential needs are not substitutable and as limits are clearly referring to the environment, and not to “natural capital or a substitute thereof”.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [sylvia.lorek@t-online.de](mailto:sylvia.lorek@t-online.de) (S. Lorek).

<sup>1</sup> Frequently, only the first sentence is quoted as the ‘Brundtland Definition’ of Sustainable Development, which leaves more space for interpretation and suggesting priorities more in line with the prevailing economic paradigm.

<sup>2</sup> As production is a form of resource consumption we use the term ‘sustainable consumption’ to cover both, sustainable production and consumption, in the remainder of the text.

Unfortunately, in the 25 years since it's framing the Sustainable Development concept was often weakened and mis-interpreted. Therefore, humanity is hardly approaching it – current trends go towards the opposite direction. We neither manage overcoming poverty (OECD, 2011a) nor are respecting the planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009). However, that does not make the concept superficial – on the contrary. The environmental and social concerns of that time are today complemented by the threats of peak oil and resource scarcity, the volatility of the financial markets and the vulnerability of the real economy to them.

One of the main problems with the actual dominant interpretation of the concept is the reliance on growth, innovation and technological solutions which has led into a lock-in situation. We have reached a vicious circle in which the measures taken for short term relief increase the problems instead of solving them in the medium to longer term. The growing uncertainties, and the necessity of precautionary action call for radical changes (Tukker, 2008) (from Latin *radix*, the root), i.e. changes which are addressing the root causes of the problems instead of focussing on curing the symptoms. The green economy concept, the latest interpretation or better transformation of the sustainable development concept (United Nations, 2012), still focuses on incremental improvements. Thus it fails to provide or at least promote the radical changes needed.

Section two introduces the concepts of green economy and green growth and offers some arguments why green growth is necessary for some and a green economy for all countries, but also why this necessary step is not sufficient to reach sustainable development. Section three challenges the green growth debate and sketches central elements of a sustainable economy considering both on the supply and the demand side. This is done applying a factor analysis of the link between resource consumption and the satisfaction of human needs. Such an idealised state would remain a utopia (Morris 1517, from Greek *u topos*, without a place) if the vision were not complemented with a strategy. Section four asks how to make a sustainable economy possible and provides preliminary answers combining earlier work on sustainable production, consumption, institutional change and ecological modernisation/greening the economy. However, strategies are a means for change only if pursued by sufficiently influential agents. Thus section five seeks for possible agents and intervention points for sustainable economies, finding that currently neither governments nor business are ready to support more than incremental change and thus fall short of adequately addressing both the dimension and the urgency of prevailing sustainability challenges. For civil society to fill this gap it would be necessary to strengthen its position in the political decision making processes. There may be a window of opportunity, but the chances are slim that it will be used effectively is the conclusion in section six. People can make a difference, but will they? This is a question the paper is not able to answer, but we hope it will stimulate and frame a discussion which supports such a development for sustainability.

## 2. Green economy and green growth – no concept to overcome social and environmental problems

*Greening the economy* is an old demand, and a re-emerging issue of the policy debate every ten years since the early 1970s. By now, the need to 'green' our production and consumption is hardly any more denied, while the implications are disputed and the distribution of burdens and benefits is a bone of contention.

*Green growth* is a political catchword, coined to overcome reservations of the business sector against all kinds of 'greenery', regardless of the potential economic benefits. It is at the core of the green economy concept (UNEP, 2011). The OECD has made it its

new overarching slogan (OECD, 2011c), although it is not (yet) coherently applied (the OECD growth and competitiveness analyses do not mention the "greening" concept so far). The concept was championed by the Republic of Korea. Its government, in order to escape the impacts of the Great Recession, started a national investment program, but focussed more on pro-green investment than competing countries.<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, the Chinese stimulus program, the world's largest, claimed environmental merits. In both cases, the environmental focus was much stronger than in e.g. Germany or France, let alone the USA, but was it a problem solving strategy?

The fact that China is today by far the World's largest emitter of greenhouse gases is no longer mainly due to its large population. While the IPCC considers a limit of about 2 t CO<sub>2</sub>equ./cap · yr to be the necessary condition for keeping global climate change below the critical threshold of 2 °C, the Chinese per capita emissions are approaching 6 t CO<sub>2</sub>equ./yr and have already surpassed the European per capita average, and the investment programmes focussing on infrastructure construction can be expected to rise the emissions further (Spangenberg, 2008). The same tendency prevails in Korea; emissions are on the rise. Both countries pride themselves on having achieved a relative decoupling (i.e. emissions grow less than GDP), but they have not achieved any reduction in absolute terms and only that is what counts for the climate. In fact, they are not even announcing any steps towards such a reduction. China points to its huge group of people still living in poverty to justify its dedication to growth, and most emerging economies use similar arguments.

This points to a more general development: the majority of the World's poor is no longer living in poor countries, but in middle income ones. An estimated 960 million poor people, the majority of the world's poor, by income and multi-dimensional poverty measures, live in countries classified by the World Bank as middle-income countries (MICs) (Chen and Ravallion, 2012; Sumner, 2012a,b; World Bank, 2012). This is the result of the graduation of several populous countries from low-income status. Half of the world's poor live in India and China (mainly in India), a quarter of the world's poor live in other MICs (primarily populous lower MICs such as Pakistan, Nigeria and Indonesia) and a quarter of the world's poor live in the remaining 35 low-income countries. Thus the right to growth as claimed e.g. by India should no longer be granted to any one country, but to groups of people in poverty. In some sub-Saharan African countries on the other hand, the country as a whole is still in demand of increasing consumption and of growth, despite the recent growth period based on resource exploitation. Such a change of perspective would also highlight the fact that in affluent and middle income economies alike redistribution of wealth is the main alternative to the long disappointed hope of overcoming poverty through trickling down from the growing income of the upper classes. The experience of the last decades shows that the current neo-liberal policies lead to income polarisation, an increasing number of poor plus a growing number of very rich individuals, at the detriment of the middle class (OECD, 2011c). Whereas there is no correlation between economic growth and poverty reduction, there is a strong one between reducing poverty and the existence of a welfare state (Alber, 2002). Thus redistribution of wealth and income can be understood as an immediate necessity for sustainable development. However, such considerations play no role in the OECD green growth concept – it is essentially a resource economics concept, i.e. neoclassical economics extended by acknowledging that nature is an important capital stock and should be accounted for as part of the national

<sup>3</sup> Although the classification of many of the investments as 'environmental' remains debatable.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1745096>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1745096>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)