



Sustainable lifestyles 2050: stakeholder visions, emerging practices and future research



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ABSTRACT

Global resource use and the associated environmental impacts continue to grow, partly due to the increasing levels of European material consumption. Many policies and strategies for sustainable everyday life have been initiated by governments and businesses, mainly based on technological innovations for reducing environmental impacts of production processes, designing better products, and providing infrastructure for collective services. There is, however, a growing recognition that sustainable lifestyles can be shaped not only through technological innovation, but also through social innovation. Social innovation is an emergent field of academic research and everyday practice that aims to meet social needs more effectively than existing solutions by engaging the power of social actors, stimulating interactions among them and enabling dynamic social processes. Social innovation is often seen as an important contribution to sustainable living at the local level, but only as a niche with little immediate relevance for advancing large-scale societal change at regime and landscape levels. By employing a participatory backcasting approach, the present research challenges this perception and aims to demonstrate the importance of social innovation processes and stakeholder engagement in envisioning the evolution of mainstream sustainable lifestyles from existing and emerging sustainable practices. The paper presents results of a European social platform project, SPREAD Sustainable Lifestyles 2050, which brought together academics, European decision makers, businesses and civil society in order to explore potential visions of sustainable lifestyles in 2050 and identify focus areas for future research.

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1. Introduction

Global resource use and the associated environmental impacts continue to grow due to the increasing levels of European material consumption, despite 20 years of policy making on sustainable consumption. As a result of growth in global trade, an increasing share of environmental pressures from European consumption takes place outside Europe (EEA, 2010). In addition, the global consumer class continues to grow as people in developing nations use their increasing purchasing power to emulate the consumption patterns of economically developed countries (WEF, 2011). Consequently environmental impacts from consumption are growing. Specifically some domains of household consumption – food and drink, housing, mobility and tourism – are responsible for a large part of the pressures and impacts caused by consumption in the European Union (JRC et al., 2006).

On the other hand, recent years have also witnessed the emergence of more sustainable products, services and experimental social innovation initiatives, which signal new hope that sustainable consumption and lifestyles may be achievable for a greater number of people than ever in post-industrial societies. However, the existing initiatives are clearly insufficient as they remain dwarfed by the unsustainable consumption levels and associated environmental and social impacts of the average European lifestyle (Breukers and et al., 2011). As yet, there is no evidence that even the speed of destruction of the ecological base is slowing down, but quite the contrary (MEA, 2005; Worldwatch Institute, 2012). If our demands on the planet's resources and assimilating capacity continue to rise at the same pace as now, by 2030 we will need the equivalent of two planets to sustain our lifestyles (WWF, 2008).

The need to address unsustainable lifestyles and their side-effects has been recognised already in 1992 in the international programme for a sustainable society – Agenda 21 (UNSD, 1992). Ten years later, the UN Johannesburg Plan of Implementation also mentioned changing unsustainable patterns of production and consumption as one of the main elements of sustainable

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development. It was then decided to follow up with the development of a 10-year framework of programmes – the Marrakech process – launched in support of regional and national initiatives in sustainable consumption and production (UNDESA and UNEP, 2009), with one of its Task Forces specifically addressing sustainable lifestyles. At the EU level, the Sustainable Consumption and Production and Sustainable Industrial Policy Action Plan aims to improve the environmental performance of products and increase the demand for sustainable products (European Commission, 2008).

The challenges of operationalising and implementing these policy strategies reveal the unprecedented scale of change that society has to undergo on the path to sustainability. As demonstrated, a shift towards sustainable lifestyles cannot be realised by a single actor or by merely ‘top-down’ processes. Therefore the EU policy increasingly recognises the need for more participatory policies and strategies (European Commission, 2006). The active involvement, commitment and empowerment of all relevant stakeholders is needed for a transition towards a more sustainable society, in which a high quality of life is achieved through low-carbon lifestyles that are equally encouraged, supported and enabled across cultures and contexts.

As part of the efforts to engage different stakeholders in developing ideas about sustainable society, the European Commission has been funding and supporting the work of technical platforms. These platforms are concerned with the creation of visions, the proposition of concrete research agendas and the implementation of research strategies. Their work has been and still remains crucial for advancing research policy in the field of technology development. A large number and variety of stakeholders provide expertise, insight and foresight to identify future technical, economic and societal challenges as well as a critical mass of innovative forerunners to advance and implement innovative ideas. The success of the technological platforms has paved the way for the recent efforts of the European Commission in establishing socio-technical platforms, which have been set up in recent years to address the question of how more sustainable lifestyles can be encouraged and enabled in contemporary society, e.g. (Meroni, 2007).

So far, research demonstrates that technical, but also increasingly social innovation,¹ is vital to driving significant changes in the ways we currently live and in the ways we frame and define quality of life and well-being (Manzini, 2006). The creativity and leadership of many is needed to achieve the widespread changes that will shift current unsustainable lifestyle trends and provide sound policies, innovative business models and resilient support systems to make difficult changes easier. Individual and collective choices will have to be supported by infrastructure that enables, maintains and sustains more sustainable ways of living (Mont and Power, 2009). Lifestyles that support future sustainable societies will need to accommodate human diversity and reflect different approaches to work-life balance and personal well-being. Future sustainable lifestyles will have to be based on equity, efficiency and sufficiency and fit within the global resource limits.

Since low-carbon sustainable lifestyles² are a relatively recent idea, the knowledge base and especially the implementation in real

life remain rather scarce and scattered, and hence difficult to draw on when developing a concrete, future-oriented research policy. Therefore there is a need to mobilize the available knowledge, experiences and best practices of more sustainable lifestyles in a backcasting exercise. A better understanding of the dynamics underlying lifestyle changes is important for the dissemination of the best practices. This would prevent sustainable lifestyles from remaining as isolated local experiments endorsed by (privileged) minorities, and help them to become truly mainstream ways of living. For that, there is a need to make better use of not only the knowledge base, but also of the networks of stakeholders working with various aspects of lifestyle changes.

This article presents the results of a European project SPREAD Sustainable Lifestyles 20502 (2011–2012), which brought together business, research, policy and civil society in backcasting exercise in order to develop visions for sustainable lifestyles in 2050 and identify European research policy priorities.

Section 2 presents current European trends. Section 3 then outlines the methodology employed in the SPREAD project for envisioning the future sustainable lifestyles and backcasting the steps that need to be taken until 2050. Section 4 describes four cross-thematic visions of new European lifestyle models developed in the course of the project and Section 5 reflects on priorities for research policy.

2. Current European trends: deplorable numbers and emerging hopes

Modern European lifestyles are unsustainable. The average environmental footprint per person in many European countries is about double the available bio-capacity of those countries (EEA, 2010). Especially food and drink, housing and infrastructure, and mobility are the areas with highest environmental impacts, including consumption-related material use, greenhouse gas emissions, acidifying emissions and ozone precursor emissions. Tourism is a fourth area causing high and growing environmental impacts, both within the EU and elsewhere. Research demonstrates that:

- Together, final consumption of food and drink, private transportation and housing are the source of 70–80% of Europe’s environmental impacts (JRC et al., 2006).
- Meat and dairy consumption alone accounts for almost one quarter (24%) of all final consumption impacts – by far the largest share in the food and drink sector (Weidema et al., 2008).
- Domestic heating, water consumption, appliance and electronics account for 40% of Europe’s total energy consumption (with space heating alone accounting for 67% of household energy consumption in the EU-27) (EEA, 2010).
- Car ownership in the EU-27 increased by more than one third (35%) between 1990 and 2007 (EEA, 2010). More than one third of the world’s 750 million automobiles are owned by drivers in the EU (IEA, 2010).

For a long time, the main strategy for addressing unsustainable consumption patterns and levels has relied on technological innovation. Recent research contributions highlight the need to identify, stimulate and scale-up social innovation initiatives that complement technical innovation by changing the way in which everyday life is organized and in which we define well-being and quality of life and create our individual and collective identities (Jackson, 2005; Seyfang, 2009). The SPREAD project identified the following examples of societal innovations relevant to sustainable living practices emerging across Europe (Breukers and et al., 2011):

¹ As defined by TEPsIE – a European project on social innovation: “Social innovations are new solutions (products, services, models, markets, processes etc.) that simultaneously meet a social need (more effectively than existing solutions) and lead to new or improved capabilities and relationships and better use of assets and resources. In other words, social innovations are both good for society and enhance society’s capacity to act.” <http://www.tepsie.eu/>In line with this definition, we define social innovation as complementary to technical innovation and hence use the term socio-technical innovation.

² <http://www.sustainable-lifestyles.eu/>

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