

# Sustainable consumption: from environmental concerns to including justice and quality of life

*Antonietta Di Giulio & Rico Defila*

By looking at marketing campaigns, websites of product manufacturers or booklets providing advice for the sensitized consumer, one could conclude that merely by buying the 'right stuff' we could save the world. Conscious consumption is undoubtedly important. But consumption cannot be reduced to buying stuff, and sustainable consumption cannot be reduced to a consumer-choice-issue. Research and politics should resist the temptation of simplistic approaches and adopt a comprehensive approach that integrates concerns about the natural environment as well as concerns about the quality of life and justice.

**“How dare you!”  
(Greta Thunberg, 23.09.2019)**

How to reconcile human behaviour on both the individual as well as the collective and community level with environmental concerns, has been investigated by social sciences and humanities for decades. In Switzerland, such research gained momentum in the 1990s, due to the Swiss Priority Programme Environment (SPPE) funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). The SPPE was the soil

on which many projects have since grown, as Paul Stern hoped in the introduction to one of the books presenting integrated results from the SPPE: “I hope this book represents the beginning of a long-term effort at problem-oriented interdisciplinary collaboration among Swiss researchers and practitioners”<sup>1</sup>.

In a first phase, social sciences and humanities investigated how to avoid (further) environmental problems, and the research topic was described accordingly as behaviour being sensitive to the natural environment. In a second phase, the research focused on how to achieve sustainable development, thus adopting a broader perspective including social concerns and justice. This went hand in hand with a rising reflexivity with regard to the societal role of science, which resulted in visions of Swiss researchers about sustainability and global change and in postulating that research should produce three types of knowledge, 'systems knowledge', 'target knowledge', 'transformation knowledge'.<sup>2</sup>

The interlinkage of environmental, social and normative aspects has recently been reinforced by Greta Thunberg in her emblematic speech at the UN Climate Action Summit (New York 23.09.2019): “You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”<sup>3</sup>

## Consumption is more than buying and sustainable consumption is not about buying the right stuff

Sustainable consumption has become an important field of research for social sciences and humanities in recent years. Trying to report the broad body of (inter)disciplinary research would be presumptuous. Therefore, we limit ourselves to summarizing some points that are key to us.

Consumption does not begin with people setting foot in a store (or accessing the online shop), and it does not end with people leaving the store (or the online shop). Reducing consumption to the act of buying would be reductionist. In order to understand consumption and how it impacts sustainability, a comprehensive approach is required. We must understand how different acts are tied together, how they

- 
- 1 Stern (2001, IX).
  - 2 CASS/ProClim- (1997).
  - 3 Thunberg, Greta (2019): Transcript of the speech at the UN Climate Action Summit in New York City, 23.09.2019, in: <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/2019/09/23/greta-thunberg-tells-un-summit-youth-not-forgive-climate-inaction/2421335001>, accessed: 21.06.2021.

influence each other, and how they are embedded in social interactions and informed by material and spatial arrangements. Buying new trousers, for example, is just a snippet of consumption: this snippet is heavily dependent on, for instance, trends in fashion, on advertising, on what the peers are wearing, on the available budget, on the amount of time someone wants to invest in looking for and selecting clothes, on what shops are available and on their product offerings. And for a proper understanding and assessment of the snippet, we must know how much and for how long the trousers that have been bought are worn, whether and how they are cleaned, whether they are mended, and how they are disposed of. While some people are deeply concerned with their wardrobe, others are not. While some people can freely choose what clothes they want to wear, others cannot. All acts of consumption are embedded not only in a social, legal, and cultural context, but also in infrastructures (e.g. internet, road system, public traffic), services (e.g. alteration shops, repair cafes) and systems of provisioning (e.g. production chains). Consumption is, in other words, a complex fabric consisting of intertwined acts and decisions by different actors on different societal levels.

Acts of consumption are not ends in themselves but serve diverse functional and symbolic purposes. People 'by and large do not consume for the sake of consumption itself – they are always doing it to achieve some other end'<sup>4</sup>. Let us return to the trouser example: trousers can be worn to keep warm (or to block the sun) and stay dry, that is, for the purpose of protecting the body. Trousers can be worn to express one's identity. Trousers can be worn in order to belong to a specific community. Trousers can be worn as a political or social protest (e.g. when women who are not allowed to wear trousers do so). And these purposes are not limited to the product in a strict sense but also apply, for instance, to whether and how trousers, jeans for instance, are washed or not and to how they are individually customized. The end in itself of consumption is first, to organize one's daily life, and second, to live a life that is perceived to be valuable. In order to understand patterns of consumption, it is therefore necessary to distinguish means (consumer goods and acts of consumption) and purposes (daily life, quality of life).

With a view to sustainable consumption, it is crucial to note that environmental and social pressure are not caused by the purposes of consumption but by the means, that is, by what people do (acts) and by the consumer goods (products, services, infrastructures) they make use of in their doings. Accordingly, sustainable consumption does not depend solely on individual consumers choosing 'the right' products, nor on the individual either. The scope of sustainable consumption policies should not be limited to the behaviour of individuals but target the entire system of consumption.

## Zusammenfassung

*Konsum umfasst weit mehr als den Akt des Kaufens, und alle Konsumhandlungen sind vielfach sozial, rechtlich und kulturell eingebettet – so lautet eine Schlüsselerkenntnis aus vielen Jahren interdisziplinärer Forschung zu nachhaltigem Konsum. Der Konsum einer Hose etwa umfasst auch deren Pflege und Aufbewahrung, die Art und Weise, wie sie getragen wird, und wie man sich von ihr trennt. Und der Konsum einer Hose ist nicht nur beeinflusst von individuellen Vorlieben, von Modetrends und Werbung sowie vom Budget, sondern auch von Infrastrukturen und Versorgungssystemen.*

*Eine zweite Schlüsselerkenntnis: Konsum ist nicht Selbstzweck, sondern ein Mittel, das darauf abzielt, den Alltag zu bewältigen und ein erfülltes Leben zu führen – so kann das Tragen der Hose die Zugehörigkeit zu einer bestimmten Gruppe markieren oder ein politisches Statement sein, wenn zum Beispiel Frauen das Tragen von Hosens untersagt ist. Diese Unterscheidung zwischen Mittel und Zweck ist wesentlich für die Politikgestaltung, denn soziale und ökologische Belastungen entstehen durch das Mittel, nicht durch den Zweck. Politiken sollten deshalb auf das gesamte Konsumsystem abzielen und Lebensqualität als Zielgrösse ins Auge fassen.*

*Ein Ansatz dafür sind «Konsum-Korridore». Nach dem Prinzip «meine Freiheit endet dort, wo die Freiheit der anderen beginnt», setzt dieser Ansatz die Ober- und Untergrenze von legitimem Konsum dort an, wo «Geschützte Bedürfnisse» tangiert sind – also Bedürfnisse, deren Erfüllung jedem Menschen möglich sein sollte. Obwohl kontrovers wahrgenommen, äussert die Schweizer Bevölkerung eine gewisse Offenheit für das Konzept. Es könnte sich als valabler Referenzpunkt für zukünftige Nachhaltigkeitspolitiken erweisen.*

4 Wilk (2010, 46).

## Taking quality of life as a point of reference for sustainable consumption

For many, sustainable consumption is more or less synonymous with frugality, renunciation and austerity, or alternatively, it is synonymous with paternalism, coercion and dictatorship. A broad body of research stemming from the social sciences and humanities has uncovered how sustainable consumption can be conceived and achieved without imposing lifestyles and unduly limiting individual freedom.

Sustainability expresses a vision, the vision of a world in which quality of life is ensured for all human beings living at present and in the future. This vision integrates environmental and social concerns as well as intra- and intergenerational justice – and it is about giving all human beings the chance to be free and safe and to pursue their notion of a satisfying life. Acknowledging the importance of quality of life as a goal of both consumption and sustainability and adopting a comprehensive approach in conceiving consumption have opened up new perspectives on how to define and achieve sustainable consumption.

Sustainable consumption should be judged by the extent to which it contributes ‘to creating or maintaining the external conditions that allow humans to satisfy their (...) needs’<sup>5</sup>. This means we have to define and operationalize quality of life, otherwise just what sustainable consumption actually is remains vague. This operationalization in turn must allow responsibility to be assigned to the community without implying paternalism and imposing lifestyles, it must provide a suitable fundament for designing policies, it must allow us to distinguish between purposes (needs) and means (satisfiers, external conditions) – and it must resonate in society.

Building upon the large body of human needs theories, we operationalize quality for life in the context of sustainability by nine ‘Protected Needs’ (fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> A representative survey in Switzerland showed that these ‘Protected Needs’ do actually cause a sense of obligation in the Swiss population.<sup>7</sup> In other words, it would be possible to develop a shared understanding of quality of life in Switzerland as a societal vision on which sustainable consumption policies could build on.

## Controversial yet not polarizing – how Swiss people react to the idea of consumption corridors

In an inter- and transdisciplinary research program funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), involving researchers from more than fifteen scientific disciplines (mostly social sciences and humanities) and about 80 practitioners, different aspects of sustainable consumption have been investigated. This resulted, among other, in recommendations on how to achieve sustainable consumption. These eight ‘consumption messages’ (‘Konsum-Botschaften’) show eight pathways towards sustainable consumption that have been intensively discussed with 70 persons from politics, administration, the economy, and a broad range of civil society organisations. Each message responds to a myth, summarizes research and outlines possible concrete steps.<sup>8</sup> Two messages address basic normative aspects, two address fundamental aspects of societal transformation, three address aspects of societal governance, and one message addresses the importance of experimental societal search processes.

Probably the most challenging of the eight messages is message two on consumption corridors (‘Korridor-Botschaft’). It suggests to achieve sustainability in consumption by proceeding from quality of life and taking this as a criterion to define minima and maxima of consumption. The lower boundaries, the minima, should determine the satisfiers (and

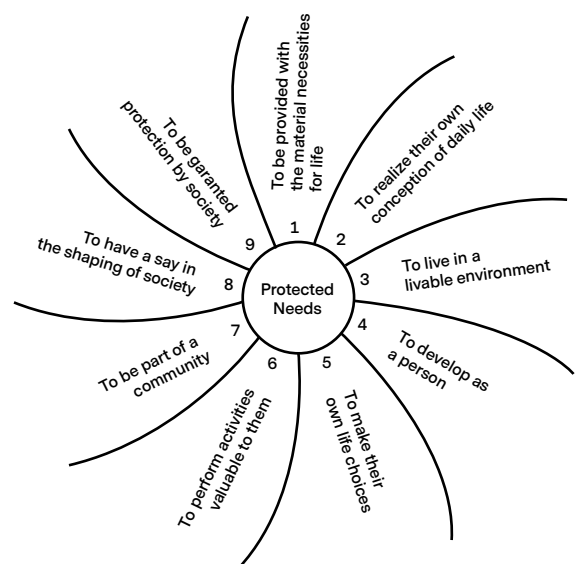


Figure 1:  
Protected Needs: what individuals must be allowed to want.  
Source: Di Giulio & Defla 2020, p. 108 (see there for a more detailed description of the needs)

5 Fischer et al. (2012, 72).

6 Di Giulio/Defla (2020).

7 Defla/Di Giulio (2021).

8 Blättel-Mink et al. (2013).

resources) that every individual must be provided with. The upper boundaries, the maxima, should determine the threshold that, if exceeded (quantitatively or qualitatively), adversely impacts the quality of life of other individuals (living now or in the future) by putting others' minima of consumption at risk. The space between these boundaries is a corridor of sustainable consumption (fig. 2).

In order to find out how the concept of consumption corridors would be received in Switzerland, we conducted a representative survey in which we asked respondents to react to arguments in favour and against this concept.

The results can be summarized as follows: The respondents show a slightly positive openness to endorse the concept of consumption corridors. Political attitude is a strong predictor, but its effect is weaker than assumed, and the concept is less polarizing than was expected (it is controversial but not polarizing). People do not reject its content, they do not think an implementation would be impossible, and they are able and willing to engage with the arguments in favor of and against the concept. In sum, the concept has the potential to provide common ground beyond traditional political divides.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, it is not out of question to discuss fundamental questions about sustainable consumption in Switzerland – this could be a promising focus for both policy design and future research.

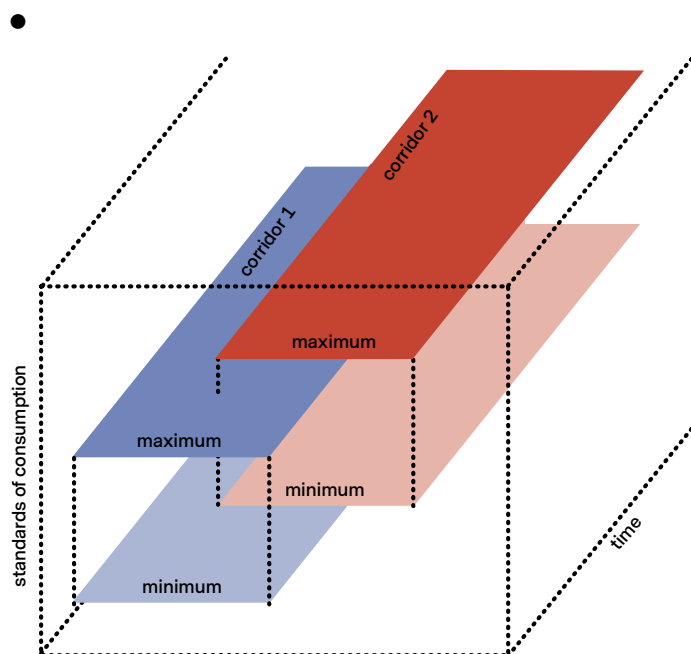


Figure 2:  
Visualization of the concept of consumption corridors.  
Source: Di Giulio & Fuchs 2014, p. 187

## Résumé

*La consommation englobe bien plus que le fait d'acheter, et tous les actes de consommation sont ancrés de multiples manières au niveau social, légal et culturel : voilà l'une des principales conclusions de nombreuses années de recherche interdisciplinaire sur la consommation durable. La consommation d'un pantalon, par exemple, comprend également son entretien et son stockage, la façon dont il est porté et la façon dont on s'en sépare. Et la consommation d'un pantalon est influencée non seulement par les préférences individuelles, les tendances de la mode, la publicité et le budget, mais aussi par les infrastructures et les systèmes d'approvisionnement.*

*Un deuxième élément clé est que la consommation n'est pas une fin en soi, mais un moyen visant à gérer le quotidien et à mener une vie satisfaisante. Le port du pantalon peut ainsi marquer l'appartenance à un groupe particulier ou être une déclaration politique, par exemple dans le cas où les femmes n'auraient pas le droit d'en porter. Cette distinction entre moyen et fin est essentielle à l'élaboration des politiques, car les impacts sociaux et environnementaux découlent des moyens et non des fins. Les politiques devraient donc viser l'ensemble du système de consommation et considérer la qualité de vie comme une valeur cible.*

*Dans cette optique, les « corridors de consommation » constituent une approche possible. Selon le principe « ma liberté s'arrête là où commence celle des autres », cette approche fixe les limites supérieure et inférieure de la consommation pour ce qui est des « besoins protégés », c'est-à-dire des besoins que chacun·e doit pouvoir satisfaire. Bien qu'elle le perçoive de manière controversée, la population suisse se montre relativement ouverte à ce concept. Il pourrait se révéler être un point de référence valable pour de futures politiques de durabilité.*

9 Defla/Di Giulio (2020).

## References

- Blättel-Mink, Birgit, Bettina Brohmann, Rico Defla, Antonietta Di Giulio, Daniel Fischer, Doris Fuchs, Sebastian Gözl, Konrad Götz, Andreas Homburg, Ruth Kaufmann-Hayoz, Ellen Matthies, Gerd Michelsen, Martina Schäfer, Kerstin Tews, Sandra Wassermann and Stephan Zundel (2013): *Konsum-Botschaften. Was Forschende für die gesellschaftliche Gestaltung nachhaltigen Konsums empfehlen*, Stuttgart. <http://edoc.unibas.ch/51109/>
- CASS/ProClim- (1997): *Visions by Swiss Researchers. Research on Sustainability and Global Change – Visions in Science Policy by Swiss Researchers*, Bern. [proclim.ch/id/Yzz6d](http://proclim.ch/id/Yzz6d), accessed 21.06.2021
- Defla, Rico and Antonietta Di Giulio (2020): The concept of ‘consumption corridors’ meets society – how an idea for fundamental changes in consumption is received, in: *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 43, pp. 315–344. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10603-019-09437-w>
- Defla, Rico and Antonietta Di Giulio (2021): Protecting Quality of Life: Protected Needs as a Point of Reference for Perceived Ethical Obligation, in: Martinez, Javier, Claudia Andrea Mikkelsen and Rhonda Phillips (eds.): *Handbook of Quality of Life and Sustainability*, Cham, pp. 253–280. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50540-0\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50540-0_13)
- Di Giulio, Antonietta and Rico Defla (2020): The ‘good life’ and Protected Needs, in: Kalfagianni, Agni, Doris Fuchs and Anders Hayden (eds.): *The Routledge Handbook of Global Sustainability Governance*, London, pp. 100–114. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315170237>
- Di Giulio, Antonietta and Doris Fuchs (2014): Sustainable Consumption Corridors: Concept, Objections, and Responses, in: *Sustainable Consumption, GAIA*, 23,S1, pp. 184–192. <https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.23.S1.6>
- Fischer, Daniel, Gerd Michelsen, Birgit Blättel-Mink and Antonietta Di Giulio (2012): Sustainable consumption: how to evaluate sustainability in consumption acts, in: Defla, Rico, Antonietta Di Giulio and Ruth Kaufmann-Hayoz (eds.): *The Nature of Sustainable Consumption and How to Achieve it. Results from the Focal Topic ‘From Knowledge to Action – New Paths towards Sustainable Consumption’*, München, pp. 67–80.
- Stern, Paul C. (2001): Foreword, in: Kaufmann-Hayoz, Ruth and Heinz Gutscher (eds.): *Changing Things – Moving People. Strategies for Promoting Sustainable Development at the local level*, Basel, IX–X. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-0348-8314-6>
- Wilk, Richard (2010): Consumption Embedded in Culture and Language: Implications for Finding Sustainability, in: *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 2,6, pp. 38–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2010.11908048>

## DOI

10.5281/zenodo.5013935

## About the authors

Antonietta Di Giulio holds a PhD in philosophy. She is senior researcher at the Program Man-Society-Environment, Department of Environmental Sciences, University of Basel, Switzerland. Before that, she worked as a senior researcher and lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Centre for General Ecology at the University of Bern. Her research interests in the field of sustainability research are how to relate the good life and sustainable development, education for sustainable development, and sustainable consumption.

Rico Defla is attorney at law. He is senior researcher at the Program Man-Society-Environment, Department of Environmental Sciences, University of Basel, Switzerland. Before that, he worked as a senior researcher and head of planning and operations at the Interdisciplinary Centre for General Ecology at the University of Bern. His research interests in the field of sustainability research are how to relate the good life and sustainable development, education for sustainable development, and sustainable consumption.

