

Beyond Consumerism: Social Change and Sustainability Transformations

A Framework Plan for the Working Group on Social Change Beyond Consumerism¹

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1. Overview

The dominant system of social organization throughout most of the global North has evolved over the past several hundred years from agrarianism to industrialism to consumerism.² The specific timing and pace of the intermediary transitions has varied across countries, but if we take the UK as an exemplar it is possible to demarcate the onset of the transformation from agrarianism to industrialism as beginning around 1750 and the subsequent transition to consumerism as commencing during the years following World War II.³ Several factors are now contributing to erosion of the key underpinnings of consumerist lifestyles in these nations, most notably increasing income inequality, contracting size of the middle class, declining participation in wage labor, and aging and shrinking populations. To this list of evolving economic and demographic factors, we could also add more recent technological innovations respect to digitalization, automation, and robotization.⁴ These processes are unfolding in complex ways and upending customary modes of consumption (and production) as well as the distributional systems that facilitate contemporary provisioning practices (Srnicek and Williams 2015; Mason 2015; Angus 2016; Monbiot 2016).

Concomitantly, there is growing political acknowledgement of the adverse consequences of consumerism (especially in terms of the ecological dimensions of raw-material extraction and the socio-environmental implications of geographically extensive supply chains). Institutions of global governance over the past thirty years have progressively recognized these conditions with

¹ This framework plan is developed on behalf of the Working Group (WG) on Social Change Beyond Consumerism which is a constituent part of the Future Earth Knowledge-Action Network (KAN) on Systems of Sustainable Consumption and Production. Details about the KAN are available at <http://futureearth.org/future-earth-sscp>.

² Consistent with the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, the WG understands consumerism as “the preoccupation of society with the acquisition of consumer goods” and the attendant reliance of policy interventions to rely on stimulation of these impulses to foster a system of social organization predicated on consumerist lifestyles.

³ It is common to refer to the third stage in this evolutionary process as the era of “post-industrialism” but this more conventional characterization generally tends to assign inadequate emphasis to the role of material consumption as a source of individual identity and the centrality of consumers (as opposed to producers) in national economies.

⁴ It merits observing that these trends are not confined to countries of the global North, but are increasingly important in understanding evolving changes in development trajectories elsewhere in the world. See, for example, Aker and Mbiti (2010) and Murphy and Carmody (2015).

the latest manifestation being the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁵ Grassroots initiatives motivated by similar considerations have proliferated and in some communities have given rise to alternative systems for sourcing and allocating goods and services. These nascent arrangements have oftentimes been organized around more localized networks of supply and heterodox business models premised on cooperativism and communal solidarity while at the same time benefitting from globalized sources of sharing knowledge and expertise (Grabs et al. 2016; Smith et al. 2016). As ensuing forces of social and technological disruption continue to challenge conventional social routines, political structures, and organizational arrangements these local experiments are likely to become more important in enabling households to achieve a semblance of economic security fostering new forms of societal (and even society-nature) relations.

Despite ongoing social change, conceptual understanding about possible future options remains stifled and underdeveloped (cf. Ivanova 2011; Cohen 2013, 2014; Blühdorn 2017).⁶ Prevailing narratives seem to be more about nostalgically reaching backwards in time or in trying to maintain a suboptimal status quo. A grand challenge of the middle decades of the twenty-first century will be centered on how societies might evolve beyond consumerism and reflexively and purposefully design a more socially equitable and biophysically sustainable system of social organization. Meeting this objective will require drawing on a range of different perspectives, partly because current understandings have been forged within the confines of distinct disciplinary specialties. In prior work, members of the WG have drawn on Erik Olin Wright’s (2010) conception of interstitial social transformation, the multi-level perspective (MLP) that has become popular in innovation studies (Geels 2002; Geels and Schot 2007), practice theoretical approaches to systemic changes (Jensen 2017), Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam’s (2015) theory of fields, and the enduring work of political economist Karl Polanyi (1944).⁷ This quartet of approaches does not by any means represent the limits of relevant work and the WG expects to add to this array of perspectives in its future activities.

2. Transitioning Beyond Consumerism

A poignant paradox of the current juncture is that while the socially engineered edifice that supports and reproduces consumerism is faltering in some parts of the world it is gaining stature in others (Yu 2014; Li 2016). Moreover even in countries where consumerist lifestyles have become most prominent and deeply entrenched over the last few decades—often facilitated by strong political resolve to neoliberal policy commitments—ensuing social changes are generally ambiguous, incoherent, and difficult to discern. There are even powerful indications that consumerism is becoming still more pervasive and successful despite its obviously destructive consequences. Steadfast fixation by governments, corporations, and others on

⁵ In fact, one of the SDGs (#12) is specifically devoted to the issue of “responsible consumption and production.”

⁶ The OED defines social change as “any significant alteration over time in behavior patterns and cultural values and norms...that yield profound social consequences.”

⁷ See Brown et al (2017) for an overview of these conceptual approaches.

consumer-impelled economic growth represents one manifestation of this phenomenon. Accompanying trends like the secular stagnation of economies, climate change, and increasing injustice between and within countries demonstrate the limits and the fragile basis of this strategy. It is particularly notable that further extension of modernization processes that encourage more societal disembedding (the lifting of social relations from culturally and geographically situated contexts) is unlikely to lead to outcomes that enhance societal well-being. Accumulating evidence suggests that transitions to sustainability will require vigorous strategies to reverse current dynamics and restore the social and ecological capital of communities (Quilley, 2012; Speth 2013).

This dilemma imposes challenges that are fundamentally different from earlier societal transformations because prior processes of social change were expedited by robust economic and demographic expansion, resource-intensive production, declining income inequality, and rising consumptive capacity (Kotz 2015; Cohen 2017). Similar conditions, at least among current high-income nations, are less readily available today and we are instead witnessing sluggish (and inequitably distributed) economic growth, labor-market informalization, and widening social vulnerability (Standing 2011; Breman and van der Linden 2014). It is instead in countries like China and India (as well as across a large part of Southeast Asia and Latin America) where the ranks of middle-class consumers are experiencing rapid growth and are estimated to number six billion by 2030 (Myers and Kent, 2004; Wilhite 2008; Tsang 2014; Guarín and Scholz 2015; McEwan et al. 2015; Stillerman 2015; Sahakian et al. 2016).

While there may be opportunities for “lifestyle leapfrogging” that enable the global South to avoid some of the consequences of outsized emphasis on consumerism (Tukker 2005; Schäfer et al. 2011; Schroeder and Anantharaman 2017; see also Blimpo 2017), the initial emphasis of the WG will be on the challenges confronting countries where consumptive lifestyles are already beginning to fade.⁸ Partly in response to these circumstances a number of countries have in recent years witnessed the amplification of alternative provisioning practices including collaborative consumption, do-it-yourself “prosumption,” and relocalized arrangements for meeting basic needs (Schor and Fitzmaurice 2014; Böcker and Meelen 2016). There has also been in some locales expanding interest in transition towns, eco-villages, and other types of intentional communities that reorganize systems of production and consumption in novel patterns (Litfin 2013; Shirani et al. 2015; Brombin 2015). Some observers contend that these adaptations represent valiant social innovations activated in response to the halting and unreliable performance of conventional lifestyle arrangements based on wage labor and transactional acquisition of consumer products (Halkier 2013; Schor and Thompson 2014).⁹ At the same time,

⁸ The notion of *Buen vivir* is another “pluriversal” approach that provides an alternative developmental pathway that is not based on the propagation of consumerist lifestyles. Prominent in some countries of Latin America, proponents seek to broaden customary development prerogatives beyond economic growth to include an emphasis on good life and focusing on the well-being of the community in terms of humans, nature, and other living beings. See, for example, Merino (2017) and Beling et al (2018). Refer also to Demaria and Kothari (2017).

⁹ A significant amount of research on social experiments to envisage and enable alternative lifestyles has been motivated by commitments to “sustainable consumption.” See for example, Hargreaves et al. (2008), Cohen et al. (2013), Mont (2014), and Jaeger-Erben et al. (2015).

various critics have highlighted the negative side-effects or the “non-transformative” and system-reinforcing character of these activities.¹⁰ Nevertheless the emergence of inventive arrangements and their ways of (re)activating values like solidarity, responsibility, emancipation, participation, and community-building can be interpreted as signs of social change that begin to go beyond consumerism and open potential opportunities for a more sustainable future (Sahakian 2012, 2017; Davies 2014; Jaeger-Erben and Rückert-John 2015; Cohen et al. 2017). While research to date on sustainable consumption and social innovation has generated significant insights on how experimental practices can enable alternative lifestyles, much remains to be done in terms of ascertaining the lessons of these efforts (Davies and Mullin 2011; Cohen et al. 2013; Davies and Doyle 2015; Jaeger-Erben et al. 2015; Genus and Jensen 2017; Martiskainen et al. 2018).

3. Objectives for the Working Group

The objectives of the Working Group (WG) on Social Change Beyond Consumerism are:

- 1) To develop a conceptually rigorous and empirically enriched understanding of the full spectrum of processes of social change (both structural and strategic) that are undermining prevailing consumerist lifestyles and contributing to putative sustainability transformations.
- 2) To deploy this understanding as a basis for generating practical knowledge for policy makers, social entrepreneurs, change agents, and others engaged in transformative social change.

As outlined below, the WG will pursue these objectives in accordance with a three-dimensional approach predicated on describing the current state of consumerism, developing normative pathways for transitioning toward sustainability, and formulating a conceptual framework for how to achieve the requisite social changes.

Present Perspective: Contemporary Consumerism and Processes of Social Change

The WG aims to establish a baseline that describes the current status of consumerism in several cultural and geographical contexts and different spheres of society, as well as to develop greater understanding of processes of social change around the world through careful analysis and critique of existing frameworks (e.g., socio-technical transitions, strategic niche management, practice theoretical approaches, second-movement interventions) and to formulate new concepts and theories.¹¹ Despite evidence of a global procession of (western) consumerist

¹⁰ For example, Breman and van der Linden (2014) provide a useful framework that highlights labor-market informalization, micro-sizing of work, middle-class contraction, income inequality, economic precarity, and financial insecurity.

¹¹ The WG includes members of the European Commission-funded project ENERGISE (<http://www.energise-project.eu>) and this initiative will be useful in providing data and other input pertaining to different dynamics of energy demand and consumption across Europe.

lifestyles we observe that consumerism manifests itself differently in particular political settings (intercultural differences) and social milieus (intracultural differences). The WG comprises a dispersed and disciplinarily varied group that allows for assembling diverse empirical insights regarding various expressions of consumerism around the world and identifying basic dimensions and categories for inter- and intracultural comparison. This analysis will generate a typology of the main modes of consumerist lifestyles and the challenges that they embody with respect to sustainable development. To complete this baseline description, the WG will develop a typology of alternative pathways and contextualized portraits with a specific focus on the main drivers, dynamics, catalysts, and accelerators related to unsustainable consumption patterns as well as windows of opportunity that occasionally become manifest due to ongoing local and global processes of social change. In this respect, the WG is particularly interested in contemporary megatrends such as digitalization and metropolization).

Questions that the WG will seek to pursue include: What are—despite all of its negative impacts—justifications for the perpetuation and extensification of consumerism and how are they increasingly being framed in countries of the global South? How does social change occur and what factors or processes could lead to further destabilization and eventual disintegration of consumerism? What are the present (or foreseeable) ruptures, irritations, transitory processes, and crises that might further undermine the enabling conditions of consumerism? What processes are likely to advance alternative futures and visions? How might the challenges and potentials of these impulses for social change beyond consumerism be accelerated? If consumption is understood to be the outward manifestation of certain social practices, why do some practices become instantiated while others do not have the same cogency? How and why do people defect from some previously ingrained social practices and how are they under certain circumstances recruited to (sustainable) alternatives? What are the different forms of social innovations and their role in informing alternative visions of consumption and production?

Normative Dimensions: Transitioning Beyond Consumerism

While the “present perspective” follows a descriptive approach, the second dimension tackles the subjective issues of transitioning beyond consumerism. The WG will accomplish this task by clarifying in detail what the notion of “beyond” entails and how its precepts are delineated. Participants will reflect and compare different value-based concepts and paradigms pertaining to societal transformation and discuss them against the background of sustainability principles. Empirical research will center on the foundations of individual and societal well-being and related ideas and could include, for example, the human-scale concept of Max-Neef and the capabilities approaches of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum as well as the aforementioned *Buen vivir* movement that seek to achieve a “good life for everybody” (Syse and Mueller 2015). We will seek to describe the “good life” in different sociocultural and economic contexts, and to develop understanding of the linkages between well-being, systems of provision, and resource consumption. Transitions beyond consumerism need to unfold inside certain corridors that satisfy minimal standards for well-being while at the same time maintaining societal development within planetary boundaries (DiGiulio and Fuchs 2014; Raworth 2017). The WG will systematically assess the normative design of these pathways and consider, among others, the following questions: What characterizes currently dominant paradigms, norms, and values that violate the normative constraints of sustainable transformation pathways? How can well-being be fostered given the need to pursue intra- and intergenerational justice? Discussion

of the normative dimensions also provides insights for development of visions for future scenarios centered on why, where, and how change should happen. In various initiatives striving to pursue sustainable consumption how is “responsibility” for sustainable consumption defined and allocated? What conflicts arises from different understandings of this “division of responsibility”?¹²

Transformation Perspective: Strategies for Making Social Change Happen

The transformation perspective focuses on processes of promising social change. The activities of the WG will build on general theories and empirical studies of novel, emancipatory practices of societal innovation and transition, including emergency-driven adaptations where various actors and institutions assume responsibility, develop new approaches and solutions, and—possibly—set in motion shifts of power (see, for example, Seyfang and Smith 2007; Davies and Mullin 2011; Pel et al 2016). The WG will establish an inventory of innovative practices that help to build a critical understanding of the dynamics responsible for renewal of interest in economic and cultural forms of solidarity, reciprocity, emancipation, participation, and community-building (McLaren and Agyeman 2015).

. The emphasis will be on enablers and disablers and of ways to take advantage of “windows of opportunity” that emerge and give rise to ruptures, irritations, and crises. The WG will explore not only “positive” movements (as seen from a sustainability perspective), but also “counter-movements” that are implicitly or explicitly intended to work in opposite directions. Visions and scenarios of futures that move beyond consumerism at different scales of change—personal/individual, group, systemic—will be strategically analyzed and accompanied by “roadmaps from the future” that backcast plausible routes and formulate plans to achieve them.

Integration of Perspectives

Bringing together these three perspectives will entail assessing suitable scenarios for action (see Figure 1). Accordingly, the WG will strive to support promising and purposeful activities aimed at identifying disruptions that have the potential to release perverse lock-ins. Because such situations can also create anxiety and withdrawal, we are particularly interested in the notion of “transformative literacy” and questions concerning how to facilitate capacity for creative and proactive reactions. The WG will combine understanding of these preconditions with explorations of past changes and future visions. We will explore, collect, and organize the perspectives that are maintained by different stakeholders in civil society and policy making, science, arts, literature, and media (see Figure 2). The international composition of the WG will provide capability to explore cross-national differences in how societal actors are responding to unfolding developments and formulating new alternatives for the future.

4. Action

The WG will work with societal partners to catalyze societal impacts by brokering knowledge and helping to coordinate concrete actions. These pursuits will take three forms:

¹² The current tendency of policies to foster sustainable consumption is to assign responsibility to individual consumers and to encourage them to select on their own initiative the sustainable version of products and services as part of a process of “greening” provisioning practices.

academic outputs, practical knowledge for policy makers, and exploratory and inspirational tools for social change beyond consumerism.

Figure 1: Typology of Research Strategies



Figure 2: Actions by the Working Group

Map relations between social change and consumerism
Develop a typology of current consumerism challenges and their social dimensions
Formulate an inventory and typology of social change activities beyond consumerism
Assess the potential of ongoing and prospective social change activities to contribute to significant social transformations
Develop a theoretical framework for social change beyond consumerism
Co-create visions of social change for sustainability
Construct cross-cultural visions for social change beyond consumerism
Organize a database of creative materials for visioning

Academic Outputs

The WG will develop a theoretical framework for social change beyond consumerism and map relations between social change and consumerist lifestyles. We will also assess the potential of ongoing and prospective social change activities to contribute to significant social transformations.

Practical Knowledge for Policy Makers

We aim to develop a typology of the major challenges raised by current societal commitments to consumerism and to formulate an inventory of social change activities beyond consumerism.

Exploratory and Inspirational Tools

Visions of the future can be powerful motivators for social change. The WG will partner with societal visionaries—writers, artists, entrepreneurs—to catalogue existing visions of sustainable societies, lifestyles, and systems that are outside of the consumerist paradigm and compile and develop methods for creating new visions for communities, cities, and regions. We will create an inventory of future visions and databases of creative materials and methods for visioning, forecasting, backcasting, and scenario planning that will be accessible online and in various languages.

The WG will lead an international, cross-cultural consortium on imagining sustainable futures within biophysical limits and bring together creative entertainment industries (film, television, digital games, design, literature, art), policy makers, and academics to co-develop new, immersive experiences of life beyond consumerism.

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