

Advancing Sustainable Consumption in Asia

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Sustainable consumption has repeatedly been identified (Agenda 21, WSSD Plan of Implementation, the Asia-Pacific Regional Environmental Ministerial Conference, The Global Environmental Forum etc) as a corner stone for achieving sustainable development in society. It is important to understand that “sustainable consumption” does not automatically translate into “less consumption” but rather to more efficient, better informed and less resource intensive consumption. This is especially true for the large segment of Asian population living in poverty, often having a real need to rather increase their consumption of basic products and services.

The Asian region is characterized by a large and rapidly growing population (Asia is already home to more than half of the world population and is projected to reach 4.7 billion in 2025), a fast growing economy, with many markets opening up to international trade and influences, and a high rate of urbanization coupled with increasing average life spans. There are presently more ‘middle to high income’ consumers – those earning more than US\$7,000 per annum - in Asia and the Pacific than in Western Europe and North America combined. Yet this still represents only 26 percent of the region’s population. All this adds up to a future scenario where more and more people, by meeting their basic needs and demands through increased consumption, increase the “consumption pressure” (an aggregated measure of the combined resource utilization and pollution generation) to levels corresponding to the ones found in Europe or North America today.

The potential environmental and social impact from a scenario where the Asian population decide to fulfill their needs by following the same patterns of increased consumption as in Europe or North America, would lead to environmental and ecological disaster. For example, assuming that India, Indonesia and China would achieve the global average of car ownership, 200 million vehicles would be added to the global fleet, twice the number of all cars in the USA today. Still, due to the wide disparities between countries and even more within countries, for a major part of the Asia/Pacific population, sustainable consumption would imply that consumption would have to increase for those without access to basic needs, whereas the more affluent consumers would have to change their patterns and levels of consumption. This dual complexity has made the consumption issue difficult for many countries to deal with. Our research has indicated that in most Asian countries, governmental policies are focussed on increasing economic growth, and private and public consumption, without paying enough attention to how to make this growth and consumption sustainable.

The relationship between material commodities and social well-being is more complex than conventional policy suggests. More emphasis needs to be placed on other contributors to quality of life, such as health, community engagement and meaningful work.

Sustainable consumption should therefore be understood as a situation where consumer needs and demands are fulfilled in an as efficient and resource lean way as possible, resulting in a minimized negative environmental, social and economic impact. The ultimate goal of sustainable consumption is improved quality of life for all consumers.

Sustainable consumption is not only about meeting the needs of consumers at the same time as protecting the environment, but is also an important strategy for achieving poverty alleviation. The lack of access to basic services, such as water, energy and health services, is in itself a key barrier for economic development for many poor people. A few examples of how sustainable consumption can help remove that barrier are:

- Avoid depletion of water reserves by applying water usage plans, by minimizing distribution losses and pollution of water reserves, and by promoting technologies using less water (in industry and households).
- Provide access to safe and affordable transport, by giving preference to public transport systems for medium distances, and non-motorized transport systems for short distances.
- Ensure secure food items by applying a labeling system, supported by independent testing/verification of product features.
- Avoid littering and illegal waste dumping by promoting sustainable product design and by establishing a recycling system supported by economic incentives.
- Establish markets for sustainable products, such as organic food, by adopting green procurement policies.

It is therefore essential to recognize that governments do not only have an interest in promoting sustainable consumption, but are also well positioned to create conditions that would influence the individual consumer to adopt more sustainable consumption habits.

At the same time it is also important to acknowledge the considerable force that “consumer demand” exercises on political decision-making. Few decision makers would be willing to support sustainable consumption if it implied limiting the opportunities for consumers to eat the food they like, to wear the clothes they prefer or to travel in the mode they want. While sustainable consumption may indeed have this implication in some areas, it first and foremost seeks to balance the demands of the individual consumer with the needs of the society as a whole (including avoiding depleting natural resources for future generations).

This may be exemplified by the use of the private car. Today the car is in many countries one of the great icons of wealth and status, in addition to filling the practical purpose of transport. The real need is access to transport. If public transport can be developed to an adequate level, the actual need for a private automobile will be reduced for many people. The desire to own and drive your own car may nevertheless still be with the consumer. Cars that are more efficient, less resource consuming and less polluting are therefore still important to develop. The new generation of hybrid cars, having significant lower fuel consumption and emission per km travelled, have gained an unexpected and quite remarkable popularity in the two largest markets for cars: USA and Japan. By promoting these kinds of technologies, in combination with improved public transport, countries can pursue sustainable consumption while still meeting the consumers’ demands. The tag line for this situation would therefore not be “consume less” but “consume smarter”.

UN Guidelines on consumer protection: section G on sustainable consumption

Consumption is widely seen as “the other side of the coin” of production. Environmental, economic and social dimensions of production patterns are directly linked to the consumption patterns in the markets they serve. While the environmental, social and economic aspects of production processes have been in the focus for various efforts to attain sustainable development for many years, it is only recently that the intricate interaction with the consumption side has come into focus. The Plan of Implementation, adopted at the World Summit for

Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, notes in chapter 3 that "*fundamental changes in the way societies produce and consume are indispensable for achieving global sustainable development*". The Plan also calls for a number of more specific actions to be taken by international organizations and governments to achieve such changes.

The United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1985 in its resolution 39/85, is an important instrument in this regard. The Guidelines represent an international framework for Governments, particularly those of developing countries, to use in formulating and strengthening consumer protection policies and legislation. In 1999 the UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection were expanded to include elements on sustainable consumption. The expanded guidelines provide an important opportunity to include environmental protection and sustainable development and to strengthen the linkage between consumer interests and sustainable consumption, thereby stimulating national policy making to promote more sustainable consumption. The guidelines recommend governments to take action in nine specific areas:

1. Environmentally sound products services and technologies
2. Recycling programmes for waste and products
3. Regulatory mechanism
4. Economic instruments
5. Public (product) information
6. Impartial testing of products
7. Research on consumer behaviour
8. Sustainable practices (e.g. public green procurement)
9. Awareness and information campaigns

Status of Sustainable Consumption in Asia

As part of an Asian Review on Sustainable Consumption conducted in the year 2004, information was collected about the present level of adoption of the nine specific sustainable consumption elements mentioned in the UN guidelines on sustainable consumption (see above). Keeping in mind the wide range of conditions in the 12 countries, the following summary can be made:

Environmentally sound products services and technologies

In general terms, technology development in Asia is quite strong. This is especially evident in China and Malaysia, where much of the world's high-tech innovation and production is taking place today. In these countries there are also ample examples of locally developed technologies that support more sustainable consumption patterns (transport, communication, energy etc). India, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand are also moving in this direction, although technologies are more often imported than locally developed. Most of the 12 countries also make use to some extent of indigenous technologies for consumption use, mostly in rural areas. However, as in most other parts of the world, environmentally sound products, services and technologies are more often an exception than a rule.

Recycling programmes for waste and products

Waste generation is one of the most visible side effects of consumption. In countries like China, Philippines, and Malaysia modern technologies are now deployed to tackle urban waste problems. However, even if modern technology is used, there are many other barriers (political, financial, planning related etc) that complicate and delay implementation. This also applies to recycling systems, where informal and small-scale recycling is still quite common but implementation of larger national recycling systems is lagging behind.

Waste recycling is high on the political agenda in all the 12 countries, especially in larger cities, but the means to implement recycling schemes are often lacking.

Regulatory mechanism

Many countries in the region have consumer protection legislation and regulation, and in some cases these are partially/indirectly also related to sustainable consumption. The Green Procurement act in the Philippines is probably one of the foremost examples. Otherwise, legislation that directly targets sustainable consumption does hardly exist in the 12 SC.Asia countries, although such legislation can be found in other Asian countries (Japan and Republic of Korea).

Enforcement of this kind of legislation is also generally poor. The exceptions may be found in India, where consumer protection regulations are well designed and networked through the consumer courts, and in China, progressing with both the regulatory mechanisms and enforcement.

Economic instruments

Most of the Asian governments tend to shy away from providing economic incentives for supporting sustainable consumption, be it positive incentives (e.g. subsidies for sustainable products) or negative (e.g. taxes on waste). On the other hand, there are many examples of economic incentives that encourage unsustainable consumption. Most probably, the potential of sustainable consumption to build sustainable development, including a sustainable economy, is still not well recognized, why economic incentives discouraging certain forms of consumption are not even considered. In addition, as economic incentives always have an economic impact on somebody, there is an additional popularity aspect to consider for politicians.

Public (product) information

Legislation for product information does exist in most countries but is not well enforced. Furthermore, the kind of information stipulated by such legislation is usually more relevant for consumer protection issues (food safety) than for sustainable consumption issues (food security).

Impartial testing of products

The best cases of impartial testing were found in India where the consumers NGOs are more active. While testing of products for standards etc. are conducted to some extent in almost all countries, truly impartial testing is by and large lacking in the region. The main reason seems to be the high costs involved.

Research on consumer behaviour

Most consumer behaviour research in Asia is carried out for marketing purposes, rather identifying how consumption can be increased, than how it can be made more sustainable. Many policy and research based groups as well as NGOs are also conducting research that can be qualified under this category. However this research is typically narrower in scope and often commissioned for specific purposes not directly related to sustainable consumption. In the least developed countries of the region, this kind of research does not exist at all.

Sustainable government practices

In China, Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand the governments have recently made decisions on adopting public green procurement practices. Translating these decisions into action takes some time however, and there are as yet no indications whether these decisions have had any real impact. Other examples of sustainable government practices, such as recycling of paper in government offices and making use of electronic filing systems, are rapidly becoming more common.

Awareness and information campaigns

Public information campaigns promoting more sustainable consumption habits are quite common in the region, especially in developed countries in Asia. However, campaigns are often not directly geared towards sustainable consumption, but to an associated issue, such as health, environment or safety. In developing and least developed countries, including the 12 SC.Asia countries, campaigns are much less common. People in countries like Sri Lanka, Philippines and Malaysia are more aware of good environmental practices than in others due to the impact of regular and widespread campaigning. However, the economic poverty conditions prevailing in parts of India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, China and many of these countries prevent people from practicing sustainable consumption.

Main Findings of the Asian Review on Sustainable Consumption

From the Asian Review a number of key issues were identified, that may important to keep in mind when discussing sustainable consumption in the Asian context:

Awareness on sustainable consumption is generally low

The concept of sustainable consumption is in general quite low and the actual meaning of the concept poorly understood (usually it is misunderstood, as elaborated above). This applies to governments as well as civil society stakeholders. In comparison terms such as sustainable production and sustainable development are better known. Nevertheless there are activities related to sustainable consumption on-going in every country, although these are not labelled as “sustainable consumption” but rather as “sustainable energy”, sustainable transport”, “organic food” etc. To the extent sustainable consumption appears on the political agenda in countries, it is typically as part of policies and strategies for sustainable development.

Different perception of the relevance of sustainable consumption

Possibly because of the low awareness and understanding of the concept, sustainable consumption, is normally regarded as having a lower priority and relevance to national development goals than e.g. sustainable production. Furthermore, many stakeholders in Asia regard consumption as a problem relevant only for western developed countries. This reflects the misunderstanding that sustainable consumption is all about consuming less. At the same time, however, especially in countries with a rapidly developing economy (e.g. China, Malaysia, Thailand), the importance of avoiding repeating the mistakes of western countries in building societies based on an ever-increasing consumption is recognized. Therefore, even if the relevance of sustainable consumption to developing countries is generally not recognized, the potential of the concept for leading the national development onto a sustainable path is recognized. Sustainable consumption activities that were identified in the Asian review were typically carried out on project basis and most often initiated as environmental projects, rather than as sustainable consumption projects.

Sustainable consumption is not yet on the agenda of consumer groups

The consumer movement in Asia is first and foremost focussed on consumer rights and consumer protection issues. This is by tradition and for good reasons in countries where substandard products are common and means to seek compensation from producers is often limited. Sustainable consumption is clearly a lower priority for most consumer groups and is not even on the agenda for most of the groups contacted in this review.

A few good examples

The Asian review identified a large number of case studies of activities and projects that directly or indirectly relates to sustainable consumption (see separate paper). Generally however, there are only a few kinds of activities that tend to surface at the national level:

- Waste management projects can be found in different stages of development in all countries.
- Ensuring adequate food supply is on the top of the agenda in any country. The attention given to sustainable consumption is often directly linked with this issue. Organic food, being relevant both to food safety (food quality) and food supply (food security) takes a special place in this regard, and is slowly being recognized in several countries as having a high development potential.
- Transport is another issue common for countries with rapidly growing urban centres. While some countries, such as India, have taken drastic action (in the case of public transport in New Delhi), many other are still struggling to find a solution.

Key constraints

The range of tools normally included in the sustainable consumption tool box (e.g. the actions recommended under the UN guidelines) include several tools that for different reasons does not work as well in Asia as in Europe:

- Legislation is well recognized and often also well developed. However, if enforcement is lacking (as it often does) the impact of the legislation is quite limited.
- Economic incentives are (politically) difficult to apply because of the cost they result in, either for the government or for different stakeholder groups (producers, consumers, retailers etc).
- Infrastructure and financing sources are often much more limited in developing countries and there is a reluctance to finance new investments through user fees or other non-traditional sources of funding.

Key opportunities

Even if the general awareness and understanding of the sustainable consumption concept is low, a considerable interest for the concept was shown by groups being introduced to the concept through the Asian review. There is clearly a high potential to kick-start activities and regional networking in this area in Asia. An important consideration is, as ever, what level of technical and financial support that can be generated for specific activities.

How to achieve Sustainable Consumption in Asia

Throughout the review process it became evident that sustainable consumption as a concept is generally poorly understood in most countries. So far very little attention has been given to sustainable consumption issues (as opposed to safe consumption, which is comparatively well developed) in the participating countries. Environmental impact has first and foremost been approached as an issue for producers and regulating authorities to deal with, and the connections between consumption and other development goals has mostly been approached from a purely economic perspective. Unfortunately, by approaching consumption only from

an economic perspective, the misconception that any kind of increased consumption is good for the economy and thereby for the society as a whole is easily arrived at.

This emphasizes the need to present sustainable consumption within its proper context, clarifying not only how it can be achieved, but also why it should be pursued. It is important that sustainable consumption is recognized as a strategy to meet other development goals, such as access to basic services, economic development and poverty eradication. In order to avoid presenting the concept as a goal in itself it is also necessary to highlight that successfully adopted sustainable consumption approaches should ultimately result in a better quality of life.

A drawback of the UN guidelines on consumer protection, section G on sustainable consumption, is that recommended actions are presented without clarifying how they may contribute to sustainable consumption and how they relate to each other and to other “building blocks” not specifically mentioned in the guidelines. For this reason the following model (figure 1) was developed to explain how sustainable consumption may contribute to a better quality of life, and how the specific actions recommended in the UN guidelines contribute to that end. The model may be summarized as follows:

The main goal for sustainable consumption is to achieve a better quality of life for all

There are numerous reasons to adopt sustainable consumption, including the need for poverty alleviation, protection of natural resources, and sustainable economic development. However, the overarching goal in adopting sustainable consumption policies and activities is to achieve a better quality of life for all (very good).

To achieve the goal of better quality of life through sustainable consumption the following priorities are identified in Asia

1. Sustainable economic development
2. Create an informed society
3. Ensure food security
4. Provide health and sanitation
5. Develop environmentally sound products and services

Goals, Activities and Supporting Mean for Sustainable Consumption in Asia

The main Goal of Sustainable Consumption in Asia has been identified as “Improved Quality of Life for all”.

For this Activities in the following areas will help achieve sustainable consumption in Asia

1. Awareness, education & marketing campaigns
2. Waste Management through the reduce, reuse, recover & recycle approach
3. Certification & product information
4. Sustainable government practices
5. Independent testing

Supporting means of achieving sustainable consumption could be:

1. Finance, infrastructure & capacity building
2. Monitoring & enforcement
3. Economic instruments

4. Voluntary business and social instruments
5. Legislative backup
6. Consumer behaviour research
7. Efficient and appropriate technologies
8. Good governance

Goal: Better quality of life

The 12 countries studied in this review display significant differences in economic, social and cultural conditions. The group includes least developed (LDC) countries such as Bangladesh, Laos and Nepal, as well as the two economic giants of the region; China and India. Also rapidly growing economies such as Malaysia and Thailand are represented. The average income per capita ranges from US\$ 310 to US\$ 9000 per person and year. At the same time, however, all countries (possibly with the exception of some LDCs) showcase large disparities of income within each country, including people living in absolute poverty as well as the extremely wealthy. In addition several countries have also established a large (and growing) middle-income class of consumers, contributing to the rapidly increasing consumption levels in the region. Further complicating the situation is a growing divide between rural and urban population. Urbanization is a major factor in Asia, focussing economic development (as well as associated environmental and social problems) to urban centers, leaving rural areas in the backwaters of development.

Nevertheless and in spite of differences between and within countries, there are a number of goals that are generally recognized in all these countries as overarching development priorities. These include meeting the needs of all people for access to food, clothing & shelter, followed by health & sanitation, education, communication, energy and transport. One of the greatest challenges for Asian governments is to meet the millennium goal of halving the number of people in poverty by 2015. With a 1.3 per cent population growth rate, the challenge is immense as the number of people in poverty too is rising along with the growing population. In Asia it is believed that alleviating poverty is one of the main strategies to achieve improved quality of life.

Highlighting how sustainable consumption may contribute to the above priorities, and in particular to poverty alleviation, is therefore important.

Priority area: Sustainable economic development

The term “*sustainable economic development*” denotes a situation where the national economy is able to ensure that the basic needs are fulfilled for all. In a sense it is more ambitious than the traditional ambition of “economic growth” as it also implies that the economic growth of a country should not be allowed to infringe on the access to basic needs and services of its population. An example of how sustainable economic development diverges from traditional economic development is the cutting down forests (for timber sale) in an area where people make a living from the forest itself.

In some instances, governments are also trying to ensure that the basic needs provided for under sustainable economic development are also met from resources within the country, rather than from imported resources. Energy supply is one such example, where several countries depending on imported fossil fuels have now set ambitious targets for developing nationally available energy sources, including renewable energy sources. At the same time however, the potential benefits of globalisation also need to be recognized in allowing countries to provide for basic needs at a cheaper cost.

Sustainable consumption will normally contribute to sustainable economic development by ensuring that resources are utilised in an as efficient way as possible, through improved technologies, increased consumer awareness, better integration of governmental policies, economic instruments, legislation, etc.

Priority area: An informed society

Consumers in Asia typically form their consumption patterns based on factors such as access, price, convenience, brand recognition, and quality. While acknowledging the fact that consumer purchasing power is often limited and low in Asia, lack of awareness, education and knowledge about how consumers' habits may impact the environment or their long-term health is still a key reason for unsustainable consumption trends in Asia.

Efforts to inform and educate people (in their roles as consumers, as well as in their professional roles as producers, decision-makers, politicians, civil society representatives etc) are therefore a key area to address. This was also singled out in the UN guidelines as a recommended action area. Awareness and education, fostering consciousness and willingness to act, is many times seen as a stronger tool to influence public behaviour, than law and enforcement (in particular when enforcement is weak, as it often is).

Priority area: Food security

One of the greatest challenges of Asia is feeding the large population. The challenge of food security is in providing adequate food supplies of sufficient quality to everybody.

Food production, including agriculture, fishery/aquaculture and animal husbandry, is a major consumer of water and energy, as well as being a main cause for global deforestation, pollution and extinction of species. It is also an area of international conflicts, not least in the World Trade Organisation, where unilateral support to domestic food producers, are accused of being a major cause of unfair distribution of global wealth.

In order to increase the output from food production per hectare of productive land, monocultures, chemicals and genetically modified organisms (GMO) are becoming more common. Unfortunately, these may also have negative effects such as mono-cultures running the risk of being totally wiped out by one single pest, chemicals causing pollution and decreasing biodiversity, and GMO's beings spread beyond controlled areas.

If food security is an element of sustainable consumption, then food production systems that can meet the demand for food, without posing a risk to health and environment need to be developed. Organic food (defined as food manufactured only using natural methods, without the use of chemicals, GMO's or other synthetic input) is one example of such systems. The mainstream food producers in Asia, as well as their counterparts in governments, are often not well aware about these challenges and are poorly prepared to deal with adverse effects. The recent and repetitive bird flu epidemic in Asia is an excellent example of the inability of many producers (and in some countries also of the concerned authorities) to recognize the need to change their behaviour. Sustainable consumption activities, such as public education and information, certification and independent testing of products, and sustainable practices, can be useful tools in promoting food security.

Priority area: Health and sanitation

Access to health services (medical services as well as clean freshwater) and to sanitation is integral for sustainable consumption. On average, Asia has the lowest availability of freshwater per capita in the world. According to the World Health Organization inadequate water supply and poor sanitation cause over half a million infant deaths a year in Asia and huge burden of illness. On the other hand several Asian countries have developed world-leading health services, as well as public health programmes, and are also undertaking

ambitious water supply and sanitation programmes. The challenge for Asian countries, from a sustainable consumption perspective, is to extend these services to everybody, not only to persons above a certain level of income or to persons living in urban centres. Tools identified in the UN guidelines that may be used for this purpose include economic instruments, use of improved technologies and access to education and information.

Priority area: Environmentally sound products and services

Environmentally sound products and services meet the needs of the consumer in an as effective and efficient way as possible, with a minimized negative impact on the environment. Such products and services can be exemplified by renewable energy sources, by public transport, by e-mail for communication, by recyclable packaging, by low-energy light bulbs and so on.

Access to environmentally sound products and services highlights the links between producers and consumers. Consumers can only consume what is offered by producers, and producers tend to produce what they think consumers are likely to buy. Therefore, if consumers are to become more sustainable, producers need to offer products that are more sustainable, including aspects on the products' resource use, waste generation, effectiveness in satisfying the need of the consumer and so on.

This integrated approach to improving the total system of production-consumption was established at WSSD and is promoted under the 10-year Framework on Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP), or the so called "Marrakech process". While sustainable consumption in general and the UN guidelines in particular, are contributing to SCP, sustainable consumption is in itself a more narrowly focussed undertaking.

Access to environmentally sound products and services is not limited to the developed world but is more often owned by an individual company or organisation that may be applying this technology in developed as well as developing countries. A common challenge for adopting such products and services is not only accessing information about the technology, but also to develop capacity (intellectual as well as infrastructure, cultural and economic capacity) to adopt the product/service. In addition, consumers need to be provided with adequate information about the product/service (e.g. in the form of an eco-label or product declaration) in order to be able to make an informed choice. Such labels/product declarations furthermore need to be independently verified to be reliable.

The above reasoning leads to many of the action areas (third level from the top in figure 1) recommended for achieving sustainable consumptions, many of which are also recommended in the UN guidelines.

Action area: Awareness, education and marketing campaigns

The general level of awareness about sustainable consumption issues is quite low in Asia. Considering that the individuals, business and government organisations are not only potential targets for sustainable consumption efforts, but are also potential agents for change, it is essential that their knowledge about sustainable consumption is improved. It is therefore extremely important to provide education, information and marketing campaigns about sustainable consumption. In addition to seeking to raise the awareness among the general public, specific campaigns targeting key stakeholder groups, such as media, retailers, and corporate decision-makers may be warranted.

Action area: Waste management through the reduce, reuse, recover and recycle approach

Piling mountains of waste in the streets and at the waste dump are perhaps the first visible signs of a society not coping with its consumption patterns. This is especially apparent in (but in no way restricted to) larger cities in Asia. While serious efforts are made by local authorities to acquire and manage landfills, this too has been opposed and confronted by community and environmental lobbies. The positive reaction to this by

government, civil society and even the business sector is the gradual recognition of waste as material sources for new products. There are many cases of recovery and recycling of organic matter into composting, plastic recycling into different forms of products, lead recovery from batteries, waste paper recycling, etc. The examples found in Asia range from small home based best practices, through community programmes and cottage industries up to large-scale industrial recycling businesses and even national scale circular economy programmes.

The main challenge in many Asian countries is to establish a wider recycling system for specific materials.

Action area: Certification and product information

Certification and product information serves to provide the consumers with reliable and easily accessible information/indications about the environmental impact/criteria of that product. The environmental labelling process in Asia can be traced to over a decade in countries like Thailand and India, while the more recent attempts can be found in China and Philippines. Most of these programmes are an extension of the environmental or organic movement. Such eco-labelled products are more a fashion or prestige item for the upper consumer class that has the purchasing power. The fact that such eco-labelled products are less in quantity, higher in price and lacks mass accessibility has weakened their penetration and are in fact not widely recognized among consumers in Asia.

Certification and product information/eco-labelling are also being used as a tool to access export markets to countries where the consumer awareness is better developed. However, the eco-labelling process itself has become an issue of high pricing where natural and organic based agriculture that prevails in parts of rural Asia falls out of the context of legitimate labelled production.

Eco-labels should not be confused with product quality standards, which are devised to control the quality and health aspects of products and services (in fact, some quality standards, such as ISO 9000 do not prescribe the quality level itself, only that the quality level does not change from time to time). Most of the countries under review do have set product quality standards for both consumer products and health products. However, while legislation is sufficient to address the issues of consumer protection, the enforcement capacity needs serious attention.

Action area: Sustainable Government Practices

Public procurement has been considered one of the key policies that could be used to promote changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. Sustainable procurement is the process in which organisations buy supplies or services by taking into account:

- the best value for money considerations such as, price, quality, availability, functionality, etc.;
- environmental aspects ("green procurement": the effects on the environment that the product and/or service has over its whole lifecycle, from cradle to the grave);
- the entire Life Cycle of products;
- social aspects: effects on issues such as poverty eradication, international equity in the distribution of resources, labour conditions, human rights.

Based on the project's research Asian organizations are far from truly implementing sustainable practices within their own operations. Low potential of investment in new infrastructure, lack of price competitive products in the market and inadequate supply chain to promote environmentally sound alternative products and services are primary reasons for the low levels of implementation.

Only very few examples, such as the Philippine Presidential Decree on Green Procurement, can be found in Asia. While the actual practice is yet to be implemented in the Philippines? It should be noted that many other governments in Asia too have discussed the possibilities of starting the green procurement process with government institutions taking the lead.

Action area: Impartial product testing

Different levels of economic development and inconsistent approaches to product testing means that consumers make purchasing choices based on incomplete data and controversial claims. Traditionally, independent product testing for environmental claims and effects has involved only a minimal range of products, usually those covered by labelling schemes. Therefore, there is a need to broaden testing efforts that focus on health, safety and performance aspects to also include sustainability concerns. Such an approach would involve testing of issues along the production, consumption and disposal phases of a product and/or service.

Independent product testing can give an indication of a product's impact on different environmental burdens such as depletion of the ozone layer, waste generation or destruction of ecosystems. Additionally, product testing can provide a picture of the sustainability of a product or service throughout its life-cycle, rather than isolated testing of the production, use or disposal phases. Independence of testing bodies is a crucial factor to consider. This is because testing bodies that do not have a vested interest in the products or services under scrutiny appear to elicit greater public confidence.

One of the weakest areas in Asia is on impartial testing of products and claims. This is due to lack of infrastructure and capacity available in Asia and specially the high costs involved in the process. While governments too are finding the process expensive to maintain, independent parties such as NGOs are rarely able to conduct professional testing due lack of funding and facilities. Asian governments generally need to improve their capacities to conduct impartial testing by assisting in the setting-up of more modern laboratories and also by backing up independent groups in establishing testing laboratories.

Supporting area: Finance, infrastructure and capacity building

Although Asian national policies do not mention sustainable consumption as a national goal, the fact is that sustainable consumption is accepted as a means of achieving better life styles. However, the main constraint in implementing the concrete action areas identified in the review is lacking financial resources, infrastructure and capacity to implement the actions. While the first task is making sustainable consumption a stated national priority, the other immediate approach should be to support such policy by enabling finance, infrastructure and capacity building both from internal and external sources.

This is of course in no way a unique observation for sustainable consumption or for Asia. However as sustainable consumption should contribute to other development priorities of governments being achieved, it should be possible to pool resources from several different stakeholders (industry, government, civil society) or from different departments within an organisation (e.g. from different ministries) to implement sustainable consumption activities. Public-private partnerships and inter-departmental coordination could be used for this purpose.

Supporting area: Monitoring and enforcement

Asian countries do have progressed well in their legislation to promote environmental protection that complements sustainable consumption as well. The weakness in achieving the mandated process is the weakness in monitoring and enforcement. The first reason for weak monitoring and enforcement is attributed to lack of capacity that stems from financial constraints. Although this holds truth to a great extent, it should be noted that corruption, lack of commitment and political interference too are major contributors in this situation.

The Consumer Courts in India provide a rare success story in the area of monitoring and enforcement capacity. The unique and decentralised consumer courts system established in India is a positive model that can be adopted by many countries in Asia to provide effective and efficient consumer protection.

Supporting area: Economic instruments

Consumers, as well as producers and their intermediaries (e.g. distributors, retailers and marketing agencies) are all first and foremost reacting to economic signals. For most consumers in Asia the price of a product is the single most important factor deciding what product they purchase. For this reason it is important that sustainable products and services are at least competitively priced (preferably having a cheaper price) compared to other products/services. Economic tools such as tax breaks, pollution fees, pay-for-return systems etc. need to be established.

Supporting area: Voluntary business and social instruments

The main voluntary business instruments discussed in the Asian review are corporate social responsibility (CSR), Social Responsibility Investment (SRI), Life Cycle Approach (LCA) and Full Cost Accounting (FCA).

Even if there are a growing number of companies adopting these tools, as well as triple bottom-line reporting and other tools, these still only constitute a small part of the total business sector in the region. Typically it is large multinational corporations that are leading the way. The vast majority of small and medium sized enterprises (SME) remain outside these programmes, both for lack of capacity and lack of finance. Voluntary business instruments have nevertheless the potential for creating a more supportive environment for sustainable consumption. Capacity building and possibly business-to-business sharing of practices (or greening of the supply chains) may be useful for engaging more companies.

Supporting area: Legislative backup

A plethora of environmental and consumer protection legislative instruments are widely available in most of the countries in the region. The leading legislation that promotes sustainable consumption comes from the National Environmental Acts and Consumer Protection Acts. In some countries the National Policy on Sustainable Development also deals with sustainable consumption as a sub-issue of sustainable development. Some countries, e.g. the Philippines, have progressed into having legislation/standards promoting individual sustainable consumption building blocks e.g. public green procurement.

However, as sustainable consumption is in fact constituted by several individual elements (as described in figure 1), many of which are already covered by legislation, new legislation for sustainable consumption may not always be the best way to approach the situation. Instead, existing legislation may be adapted to better promote sustainable consumption, and enforcement of existing legislation may be strengthened.

Supporting area: Consumer behaviour research

One of the weak and neglected areas in Asia is the conduct of proper and continuous consumer behaviour research. Knowledge about the preferences and behaviour of consumers is necessary to obtain in order to encourage more sustainable consumption patterns. Consumer behaviour in Asia however probably rather diverse, ranging from rather western-style modelled patterns among richer segments of the population, to more traditional, possibly also more sustainable, patterns among low-income consumers, much governed by their limited access to services, infrastructure and products.

Whatever the situation may be there is very little research being conducted in Asia to ascertain the patterns and changes of consumer behaviour. Most of the consumer research is conducted for market research requirement with clear objectives to identify areas to penetrate and induce the consumer towards more consumption.

Supporting area: Efficient and appropriate technologies

Efficient and appropriate technologies are superior to other similar technologies in various ways, e.g by generating more output from the same amount of input (e.g. recovering more ore from mining waste, purify wastewater to a higher standard, and reduce pollution from burning fossil fuels) and by doing this in a way that is acceptable financially, socially and culturally.

A simple technology, such as drilled freshwater well, may have enormous consequences in freeing up time for villagers, previously spent on carrying water from long distances.

Adoption of new technologies, especially in industry, is more or less self-regulating. There is a constant race for gaining the competitive advantage by improving the technology applied for a certain process. Larger companies have often an advantage in a better developed capacity for adopting new technologies. The role of government can be to stimulate the development and adoption of cleaner technologies by the private sector, possibly with an extra focus on supporting the important SME sector.

Governments can also strengthen their capacity to deal with possible unintended effects of technological change by applying social instruments, by promoting greater openness to societal concerns about new technologies, and building the capacity to assess technologies in agencies responsible for protecting the public interest independently from the agencies promoting their adoption.

Supporting area: Good governance

Corruption, lack of transparency, and authoritarian decision-making has become part and parcel of many sectors within Asian societies. An estimate by the Asian Business Review shows that up to 50% of public income is diverted through corruption and bribes in some countries. Providing a level playing field for all actors is one of the most important conditions for sustainable consumption, and for this to be achieved, corruption is one of the most important factors to overcome.

While good governance is expected from the national legislative sectors and administrative sectors, it should also be noted that business and civil society sectors too should effectively practice good governance for a society to achieve better living standards as a whole and therefore sustainable consumption.

Opportunities for Promoting Sustainable Consumption

The appropriate conditions for transfer of know-how may be described as:

- Useful information is available
- The owner of the information is willing to share this
- The recipient of the information is willing and able to receive and adopt the information for local purposes.

In the case of sustainable consumption, the first and second bullet is generally fulfilled. As for the third bullet, the general low awareness and understanding of sustainable consumption in Asia (as was identified in the Asian review) presents the first barrier to successful transfer of information. Engaging and motivating key decision-makers in government and other sectors may therefore be a first priority.

This priority is probably most gainfully achieved if sustainable consumption is presented into the local context. It is essential to clarify how sustainable consumption may contribute to other higher priorities in the local context, and how different groups and society as a whole can benefit from adopting sustainable consumption practices. It is equally important to achieve the appropriate stakeholder buy-in, ensuring that traditional values, social and cultural identities, and other priorities of the local consumers are not negatively affected. It is here important to also recognise that the term “consumer demand” is not limited to affluent western consumption styles, but is equally applicable to large segments in Asia being exposed to affluent styles of consumption.

Governments obviously have a key role to play in creating the proper conditions conducive to sustainable consumption, and in activating other stakeholders. This is also a reason for the UN guidelines to focus on government initiated activities, and for SC.Asia to engage governments in the project. However, the need for active support and participation of other stakeholders, in particular from civil society, is equally important, as is also reflected in the composition of the SC.Asia target groups.

As with many other efforts sustainable consumption initiatives may best be promoted by initiating limited activities with a clear focus and target, demonstrating the meaning and potential benefits of sustainable consumption to other stakeholders. “Learning by doing” is a well-recognised approach and is also the suggested approach. By drafting and testing “National Action Plans on Sustainable Consumption” for a specific area, a country may be able to overcome some of the initial barriers to sustainable consumption. In addition, this approach awards a sense of ownership and responsibility for the plans to participant countries. This will be an important ingredient to sustaining national-level efforts towards implementing sustainable consumption.

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