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Doris A. Fuchs and Sylvia Lorek

## Sustainable Consumption Governance: A History of Promises and Failures

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**ABSTRACT.** What are the implications of the current international political, and economic settings for consumer policy, and, in particular, those regarding sustainable consumption? In terms of improvements in the efficiency of consumption, the settings have induced efforts to this effect and show potential for further progress. In terms of necessary changes in consumption levels and patterns, however, little progress has been made since the Rio Summit nor is there likely to be any in the near future. These two dimensions of sustainable consumption need to be differentiated, as there is a substantial amount of controversy regarding our ability to achieve sustainable consumption on the basis of improvements in efficiency alone. The paper traces these differences with respect to the work of the major international governmental organizations (IGOs) engaged in developing sustainable consumption governance. It argues that the lack of commitment to strong sustainable consumption among IGOs can be explained by their “weakness” as actors in global governance and the existence of strong opposing interests among consumers and business actors.

Unsustainable consumption patterns and levels, in particular in industrialized countries, are a major cause if not *the* major cause of environmental degradation in the world today (UNDP, 1998). Without sustainable consumption, therefore, sustainable development is impossible. Individual governments face severe constraints in the pursuit of sustainable consumption in a globalizing world, however (Fuchs & Lorek, 2002). Accordingly, sustainable consumption has become an important issue on the global governance agenda (Reisch & Scherhorn, 1999).

But what is sustainable consumption? In 1994, the Oslo Symposium defined sustainable consumption as “. . . the use of services and related products, which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of further generations” (Ministry of the Environment Norway, 1994). To be

more specific, in the eyes of many sustainable consumption scholars, (e.g., Daly, 1998; Princen, 2003; Spangenberg & Lorek, 2002), moving towards sustainable consumption will require two developments: First, sustainable consumption requires an increase in the efficiency of consumption, which can be reached via technological improvements. Improvements in the eco-efficiency of consumption mean a reduction in resource consumption per consumption unit due to improvements in production processes or an efficiency friendly design, for example. Often, these improvements are win-win scenarios. Improving the efficiency of consumption can be seen as the necessary prerequisite for achieving sustainable consumption.

However, existing limits to Earth's resources and to its capacity to serve as a sink for pollutants mean that efficient consumption can only be a *weak* version of sustainable consumption. As research on the so-called rebound effect has documented, achievements based on efficiency alone are very often overcompensated by a growth in consumption volumes (Greening, Green, & Difiglio, 2000). In consequence, a second development needs to take place to provide a sufficient condition for sustainable consumption: changes in consumption *patterns* and reductions in consumption *levels* in industrialized countries.<sup>1</sup> This sufficient condition requires changes in infrastructures and choices as well as a questioning of the levels and drivers of consumption. As a shorthand, it will be called *strong* sustainable consumption in the context of this paper.<sup>2</sup>

The issues associated with strong sustainable consumption are politically highly controversial, of course. Yet, it is these issues that a focus on sustainable consumption – rather than sustainable production or sustainable development – highlights (Princen, 1999). Three examples may serve to illustrate the difference between weak and strong sustainable consumption approaches:<sup>3</sup> (1) Weak sustainable consumption could mean driving a car that will use 3 l rather than 10 l of gasoline per 100 km. Strong sustainable consumption, in contrast, can mean going by train rather than by car or travelling less far or less frequently. (2) Important improvements in efficient consumption related to housing can be reached through proper insulation, efficient heating systems, and the construction of low energy houses. For strong sustainable consumption, behavioural factors such as airing and the choice of adequate room temperatures are important. In addition, a strong sustainable consumption perspective would problematize the societal trend to continuously

increase the square meter living space per person. (3) In the consumption cluster of nutrition, technological efficiency measured in yield/area is mostly accompanied by environmental pressure (e.g., energy-consuming fertilizers, groundwater pressure, or the controversial effects of genetically modified organisms). Strong consumption measures, in contrast, could include a reduction in meat consumption and an emphasis on regional products.

In this paper, the developments in global sustainable consumption governance since the Earth Summit in 1992 are traced. It is shown that weak sustainable consumption has received some attention, while strong sustainable consumption is almost entirely absent from political debates. Today, strong sustainable consumption exists only in marginal sectors of society and research, or as a symbolic reminder in official documents. International governmental organizations (IGOs), in particular, have avoided strong sustainable consumption issues. Using a global governance framework, it is argued that this development can best be explained by the weakness of IGOs and the alignment of consumer and business interests against strong sustainable consumption measures. The most that the latter actors (and therefore national governments) are willing to support in the name of sustainable consumption are (often marginal) improvements in eco-efficiency. Hence, official claims tying the failure to address strong sustainable consumption to a lack of understanding of the different conceptual facets of sustainable consumption should be viewed with considerable scepticism (UNEP, 2001). These official claims would suggest that further conceptual deliberation will allow progress in strong sustainable consumption governance. In contrast, it is argued here that the only chance to reintegrate the issue on the global political agenda lies in changes in the political strategies of the few actors currently committed to strong sustainable consumption – if there is such a chance at all.

The analysis is pursued in two steps. The first part of the paper presents an overview of developments in global sustainable consumption governance to date. Beginning with the Earth Summit in 1992, at which Agenda 21 firmly established sustainable consumption on the global governance agenda (United Nations, 1993), the various activities of the prominent global (and some national) actors are explored. In particular, the work of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) are highlighted.

Furthermore, the outcome and follow-up of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg are addressed. In the course of this assessment, the one-sided nature of the global sustainable consumption debate and, specifically, the missing emphasis on strong sustainable consumption is pointed out.

In the second part of the paper, an explanation for the lack of progress in strong sustainable consumption governance is developed. Adopting a global governance framework, the potential strengths and weaknesses of IGOs in global economic, social, and environmental governance are discussed. The limited willingness of their direct and indirect “constituents” to support strong sustainable consumption are then described. Specifically, it is argued that both consumers and business (and therefore also governments) tend to oppose strong sustainable consumption measures despite claims to the contrary. Due to space constraints, this discussion can only be brief and merely spotlights the most prominent arguments and findings from the relevant literature on consumer behaviour and on the environmental and social aspects of business behaviour. Finally, it is suggested that global strong sustainable consumption governance can only derive from the development of new political strategies by NGOs committed to the issue.

#### FROM RIO TO JOHANNESBURG

Sustainable consumption was firmly established on the global governance agenda in the course of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992. Chapter 4 of Agenda 21 called for the adoption of sustainable consumption patterns (United Nations, 1993). Since then, much has happened in terms of global sustainable consumption governance from one perspective, and yet very little from another. A number of actors, in particular IGOs, have addressed the issue of sustainable consumption and developed a range of activities (see Table I). Yet, their goals have lacked ambition and the politically controversial idea of strong sustainable consumption has been dropped from the agenda.

Global sustainable consumption governance has focused almost exclusively on questions of efficiency so far. After the issue had appeared on the international political agenda in the context of the momentum and pressure provided by the Earth Summit, the politics of boundary specification and framing began. Only the earliest “global”

meetings on sustainable consumption, in particular the sustainable consumption symposium in Oslo in 1994, conceptualized sustainable consumption broadly. It explicitly noted that a focus on eco-efficiency would not provide a sufficiently comprehensive framework for identifying, understanding, and changing unsustainable consumption patterns. When actual political work on the issue started, however, IGOs systematically reduced the ambitions of sustainable consumption governance and this more comprehensive understanding disappeared from the political agendas.

TABLE I  
Major Reports on Sustainable Consumption Issued by IGOs

UN: Changing Consumption Patterns – Report of the Secretary General	1995
UN DESA: International Work Programme on Changing Consumption and Production Patterns	1995
OECD: Sustainable Consumption and Production: Clarifying the Concepts	1997
IIED: Unlocking Trade Opportunities: Changing Consumption and Production Patterns	1997
UNCHS: Changing Consumption Patterns in Human Settlements	1997
OECD: Towards Sustainable Consumption Development: Environmental Indicators	1998
IIED: Consumption in a Sustainable World (Kabelvag Report)	1998
UNDESA: Measuring Changes in Consumption and Production Patterns. A Set of Indicators	1998
UNECE: Recommendations to ECE Governments on Encouraging Local Initiatives Towards Sustainable Consumption Patterns	1998
OECD: Towards More Sustainable Household Consumption Patterns – Indicators to Measure Progress	1999
UN: Comprehensive Review of Changing Consumption and Production Patterns. Report of the Secretary-General	1999
UNDESA: Trends in Consumption and Production: Household Energy Consumption	1999
UNEP/CDG: Sustainable Consumption and Production. Creating Opportunities in a Changing World	2000
UNEP: Consumption Opportunities: Strategies for Change	2001
OECD: Information and Consumer Decision-Making for Sustainable Consumption	2002b
OECD: Towards Sustainable Household Consumption? Trends and Policies in OECD Countries	2002a
UNEP: A global status report	2002
UNEP/CI: Tracking Progress: Implementing Sustainable Consumption Policies	2002
UNDESA: Survey of International Activities on Consumption and Production Patterns	2003

*The Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) and the Division for Sustainable Development (DSD)*

The CSD has been among the most active participants in the sustainable consumption arena. In its work, it has been able to draw on the technical and organizational resources of the Division for Sustainable Development (DSD), which is part of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). The CSD emphasizes that changing consumption and production patterns has been a subject of discussion at all of its sessions. In addition, it adopted an *International Work Programme on Changing Consumption and Production Patterns* in 1995 (UNDESA, 1995). This programme focused on five aspects of consumption:

- Trends in consumption and production patterns;
- Impacts of changes in consumption patterns of developed countries on developing countries;
- Policy measures to change consumption and production patterns;
- Voluntary commitments from countries/indicators for measuring changes in consumption and production patterns;
- Revision of the UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection.

Subsequently, the CSD conducted and commissioned work on all five aspects. As part of the first theme, the CSD pursued a periodic overview of major global and regional trends related to resource consumption and their environmental, social, and economic impacts, discussed reports (by DESA) on household energy consumption and the consumption of selected minerals, and organized a global modelling forum. As part of the fourth focus, the CSD fostered the development of a core set of 17 indicators for monitoring changing consumption and production patterns through expert consultations. As part of the fifth theme, the CSD prepared an extension of the UN Guidelines on Consumer Protection. While the original set of guidelines focused on consumer protection only, the revision includes the aspects of sustainable consumption and consumer responsibility.<sup>4</sup>

In parallel, the DSD decided to make changing consumption and production patterns part of its multi-year programme, next to its work on sustainable development indicators and the transfer of environmentally sustainable technology. Among the contributions of the DSD to the global sustainable consumption agenda was its collaboration with the International Institute for Sustainable Development

(IISD),<sup>5</sup> which from 1997 to 2000 maintained a website covering definitions and concepts of sustainable consumption, key resources on the topic, and a compendium of policy instruments for changing consumption and production patterns. The website was meant as a source of suggestions and examples for governments. As project funding stopped in 2000 the flow of information and update of the website stopped also. In 2004 finally, the website disappeared completely from the Internet.

The CSD and DSD have conducted important work and have produced input on trends, indicators, and policy measures regarding sustainable consumption. Moreover, the high level nature and the openness of dialogue possible at the CSD clearly benefited the sustainable consumption issue, providing it with increased visibility on the global governance agenda. Yet, the CSD and DSD failed in broadly fostering the implementation of Chapter 4 of Agenda 21, due to their lack of support for strong sustainable consumption as a governance goal. Questions regarding fundamental changes in consumption patterns and reductions in consumption levels have been raised only in the context of discussions of “common but differentiated responsibilities” at the CSD, in particular its seventh session. Moreover, they have not found their way into official CSD reports and DSD work.

### *UNEP*

UNEP’s Sustainable Consumption Programme is housed in the Production and Consumption Unit of the Division of Technology, Industry, and Economics (DTIE). The programme started in 1998 with the intention of developing demand-side oriented activities to complement DTIE’s supply-side oriented ones. Its stated goal has been to understand the forces driving global consumption patterns, to develop appropriate activities for business and other stakeholders, and to look for innovation potentials for business, governments, and NGOs.

In its focus on business, the programme has promoted the adoption of the life cycle approach. With respect to NGOs, the objective has been to help them to improve communication strategies for information on consumption, consumer products, and the environment, and to foster training and networking activities.<sup>6</sup> With respect to governments, the programme has proposed frameworks enabling consumers and producers to improve the sustainability of consumption and production choices, such as institutional measures and the revised UN

Consumer Guidelines (see above). In addition, UNEP DTIE has conducted a “global consumer survey” of 700 consumers from 6 “global” cities to gain a better understanding of consumer wants. Finally, it has investigated trends and indicators for energy, materials (material flow and waste), water, and land, as well as for mobility, consumer goods and services, buildings and housekeeping, food, and recreation (Bentley, 2000).

Overall, then, UNEP has addressed a substantial range of topics related to sustainable consumption. On close scrutiny, however, it becomes clear that most of UNEP’s sustainable consumption work since the Earth Summit focused exclusively on increasing the eco-efficiency of consumption, with a particular interest in innovations for business. The former head of UNEP DTIE, moreover, has emphasized that “sustainable consumption is not about consuming less, it is about consuming differently, consuming efficiently, and having an improved quality of life” (UNEP/CDG, 2000). Likewise, the authors of a UNEP DTIE report stress the importance of considering the “rights of free consumers,” thereby giving the agenda a specific direction (Bentley & de Leeuw, 2000).

In 2001 UNEP issued a strategic policy report “Consumption Opportunities” (UNEP, 2001). The aim of the report was to develop a new, structured approach to sustainable consumption including a framework and guidelines for action with a particular focus on civil society. UNEP defined this particular report as a major part of its contribution to the implementation of Chapter 4 of Agenda 21. Importantly, this report explicitly addressed the politically sensitive topics of “overconsumption” and “misconsumption” (Princen, 1999). While the author did not use these specific terms in his own framework, his discussion of appropriate and conscious consumption is related to the ideas captured in Princen’s terms and to the question of changes in consumption patterns and levels.

Interestingly, the main activity for which the report is being used is the Sustainable Consumption Opportunities for Europe (SCOPE) project run by UNEP’s Regional Office for Europe (ROE) in collaboration with UNEP DTIE. This project is described by UNEP as a pan-European initiative to raise awareness and sensitize policy makers about the issue of sustainable consumption. Yet, the project faces two weaknesses: First, its primary focus appears to be Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Newly-Independent States, due to the availability of funding for activities there. The creation of “sustainable



consumption coalitions” clearly is important in these countries as well. But is Eastern Europe really in more need of shifting consumption patterns and levels towards sustainability than its Western counterpart? Second, even in those countries where efforts to form coalitions took place, the result was a single event rather than a continuous process.

Despite its limited practical use, the report may have been a starting point for a somewhat more ambitious pursuit of sustainable consumption governance by UNEP. In 2002, UNEP issued a Global Status Report (UNEP, 2002) identifying six strategic areas in which it perceives the greatest need for further work on sustainable consumption:

- Clarifying the various meanings of the term consumption;
- Developing better feedback-indicators to measure consumption pressures and quality of life, and putting them to use;
- Finding a more appropriate conceptual schema for describing systems of production and consumption (allowing for more complexity of elements and interactions, while simple enough to assist analysis and intervention);
- Supporting and enhancing localized campaigns to transform trends in the consumption of certain resources, or goods and services;
- Focusing production and consumption-oriented activities on the transformation of products and services;
- Developing and promoting the idea of “leap-frog” change as a radical shift in existing products, services, and business sectors.

In addition, UNEP quickly picked up the idea of a 10 year Framework of Programmes (see below) to accelerate the shift towards sustainable consumption and production, an idea that originally had been promoted by the European Union. UNEP’s plans and activities appear broad and promising. However, UNEP has yet to demonstrate its willingness and ability to move beyond its former explicit exclusion of the strong sustainable consumption perspective.

### *OECD*

The OECD is another important actor who has conducted substantial work on sustainable consumption. Acknowledging that the OECD countries are home to 19% of world’s population but consume 80% of the world’s resources, the OECD started to address the subject in 1995

with an integrated work programme “Environmental Impacts of Production and Consumption” (OECD, 1997). The focus of this programme has been on resource efficiency and the link between technological change and the environment. Hence, the programme aimed at exploring mutually supportive relationships between environmental improvements and economic growth.

The individual elements of the programme focused on data gathering and analysis, with an aim to help countries reduce the environmental impacts of household consumption patterns. The core activities were similar to those of the CSD and included the development of a conceptual framework and a set of indicators as well as analyses of trends in and policy options for OECD countries. The OECD explicitly restricted its work to important sectors and consumption clusters, specifically tourism, food, energy and water consumption, and waste generation (OECD, 2002a). In addition, the OECD conducted and commissioned reports on policy instruments, information, consumer decision-making, and participatory decision-making with respect to sustainable consumption.<sup>7</sup>

Again, the overall objective of the OECD’s work on sustainable consumption appeared to be broad and ambitious. Yet, the framework for its consumption work was clearly set in line with the OECD’s traditional focus on economic growth. Thus, it failed to go beyond the aim of improving eco-efficiency and, in the end, the mutual pursuit of economic growth and environmental quality. In the meantime, the OECD has ended its work on sustainable consumption. A follow-up in the form of an initiative to promote the adoption of the policy recommendations developed in the three years of research does not exist. Furthermore, the OECD Forum 2003 dealing with the WSSD follow-up and the implementation of sustainable development in general did not mention the aspect of sustainable consumption.

#### *Other Actors*

National governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as researchers and research networks, have also been active in the area of sustainable consumption (see Table II). Except maybe for national governments, these actors clearly are not in the same privileged position as IGOs when it comes to the forging of global agreements on sustainable consumption measures. Nevertheless, their work eventually contributes to global sustainable consumption governance.

Thus, the achievements by NGOs and scholars frequently feed into the know-how of IGOs. Furthermore, the activities by NGOs are important because of their potential influence on societal values. Likewise, efforts by individual governments to promote national sustainable consumption dialogues and measures can prepare the ground for global sustainable consumption governance.

Starting with the latter, the efforts of the Norwegian, German, and Danish governments shall be given particular attention. These governments have not only sponsored a substantial amount of research on the topic of sustainable consumption, but have pursued specific initiatives to foster global and national sustainable consumption governance. The Norwegian government has been particularly active with respect to the global agenda. It hosted sustainable consumption workshops in 1994 and 1995 (Ministry of Environment Norway, 1994, 1995) and pushed for a broad understanding of requirements and potentials for sustainable consumption governance. It has also collaborated with Norwegian research centres on promoting sustainable consumption ideas at the national level. The German government has

TABLE II  
Selection of Important Conferences on Sustainable Consumption

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1994 – Sustainable Consumption Symposium (Oslo) (see Ministry of the Environment Norway, 1994)
1995 – Oslo Ministerial Roundtable (see Ministry of the Environment Norway, 1995)
1995 – Clarifying the Concepts Workshop (Rosendal)
1995 – Workshop on Policy Measures for Changing Consumption Patterns (Seoul)
1996 – Workshop on Patterns & Policies (Brasilia)
1998 – Inter-Regional Expert Group Meeting on the Extension of the UN Guidelines on Consumer Protection (Sao Paulo)
1998 – Workshop on Indicators for Sustainable Production & Consumption (New York)
1998 – Encouraging Local Initiatives Towards Sustainable Consumption Patterns (Vienna)
1998 – Consumption in a Sustainable World (Kabelvag) (see IIED, 1998)
1999 – From Consumer Society to Sustainable Society (Soesterberg)
1999 – Sustainable Consumption: Trends and Traditions in East Asia (Chejudo)
1999 – 7th Session of CSD (New York)
2000 – Creating Opportunities in a Changing World (Berlin)
2002 – Implementing Sustainable Consumption and Production Policies (Paris)
2003 – International Expert Meeting on the 10-Year Framework of Programmes for Sustainable Consumption and Production (Marrakech)
From 2003 – Regional Expert Meetings on the 10-Year Framework of Programmes for Sustainable Consumption and Production

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Adapted from ICSPAC (2002).

initiated a national societal dialogue on sustainable consumption and sponsored research on sustainable consumption indicators and policy measures. Finally, the Danish government took the lead in the preparation of the WSSD and initiated the development of the “10-year Framework of Programmes” under its EU presidency. However, so far these efforts have failed to systematically address and endorse policy measures for fostering strong sustainable consumption.

NGOs have played a strong and active role in the global campaign to promote sustainable production and consumption (see Table III for a list of reports issued by NGOs). Throughout the many programme cycles of the CSD, NGOs occupied with production and consumption patterns regularly coordinated their advocacy and education efforts, and eventually organized themselves in the International Coalition for Sustainable Production and Consumption (ICSPAC). Many of these NGOs do ask the politically sensitive questions regarding consumption patterns and levels. Moreover, they contribute to the development of strong sustainable consumption governance by promoting the diffusion of alternative lifestyles and values. While these NGOs clearly extend their work beyond national boundaries, their influence at the global level has proven to be limited thus far. At the same time, business NGOs have strictly limited the focus of their contributions to weak sustainable consumption issues.

Scholars have also contributed much to the understanding of sustainable consumption. Importantly, current research addresses the whole range of sustainable consumption issues, including controversial questions of overconsumption and the need for changes in consumption levels and patterns. Assessment of the willingness and ability of consumers to reduce their consumption has been the focus of numerous research efforts and collaborative projects in Europe, in particular. Unfortunately, only a few of the ideas raised in this research reach the official global sustainable consumption discourse. Some national and international agencies have assumed the role of a “translator” between politics and science in this respect, however with rather poor results to date, e.g., the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) or the Oxford Commission on Sustainable Development.

Global sustainable consumption governance between the Rio Summit and the WSSD, then, showed a substantial amount of activity, including many conferences and the publication of numerous reports

TABLE III  
Major Reports on Sustainable Consumption Issued by NGOs

Friends of the Earth Europe: (Spangenberg, ed.): Towards Sustainable Europe (see Spangenberg, ed.)	1995
World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD): Sustainable Consumption and Production: A Business Perspective	1996
Friends of the Earth International: Sustainable Consumption – A Global Perspective	1997
WBCSD: Sustainability Through the Market	1999
Tools for Transition: Transitions to Sustainable Consumption and Production (see Charkiewicz, van Bennekom, & Young)	2001
WBCSD: The Business Case for Sustainable Development	2002
The European Association of Communications Agencies & The World Federation of Advertisers: Industry as a Partner for Sustainable Development. Advertising.	2002
International Coalition for Sustainable Production and Consumption (ICSPAC): Waiting for Delivery	2002
Worldwatch Institute: The State of the World 2004 – The Consumer Society	2004

by a variety of actors. Important fundamental issues were discussed and insights developed, such as conceptual frameworks and indicators. Yet, from another perspective, little progress has been made. In fact, advocates of a need for strong sustainable consumption will argue that the most crucial questions have been excluded.

#### *Johannesburg: the WSSD and Beyond*

UNEP's sustainable consumption programme was quite active in preparing reports and fostering dialogue as a lead up to the summit. Unfortunately, much of this work was disappointing. As pointed out above, the roundtables used to stimulate debate did not necessarily focus on the regions where unsustainable consumption is the most pressing issue. The advertising sector report (European Association, 2002), which the advertising industry prepared at UNEP's request in the context of the WSSD sector reports, failed to identify any problems concerned with advertising's influence on consumption levels and patterns. On the contrary, it explicitly rejected the notion that advertising could be responsible for overconsumption.

Next to UNEP, the UN Secretary General contributed to the preparations for Johannesburg. In his report, he named the changing of unsustainable patterns of production and consumption as one of the top three priorities for the next two to three decades (United Nations, 2001). Yet, his perspective emphasized increasing energy

efficiency as a strategy for the pursuit of sustainable production and consumption and paid little attention to potential measures in pursuit of strong sustainable consumption.

In addition, the International Chamber of Commerce and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development issued a report dealing with the topic of sustainable consumption (WBCSD, 2002). The report gave consumers the key role in shaping markets, thus placing responsibility firmly on the demand side rather than on the supply side. It identified increasing eco-efficiency as industry's contribution to sustainable consumption, but clearly avoided any discussion of the role of business in driving and reducing overconsumption. The only additional responsibility the report attributed to business was to inform consumers about the social and environmental effects of their choices and to provide adequate products and services.

Finally, the Integrative Strategies Forum prepared the SPAC Watch Report on behalf of the International Coalition for Sustainable Production and Consumption (ICSPAC). The contributing NGOs perceived governments to be "rehashing" unfulfilled promises from the last decade and wanted to increase the pressure (ICSPAC, 2002). However, the report, whose stated goal was to mobilize governments, industry, the media, as well as the UN and civil society groups at the WSSD and beyond, did not meet its targets either.

As was to be expected given these preparatory developments, the outcome of the Johannesburg summit does not look too promising regarding the future of (strong) sustainable consumption governance. The relevant articles in the Plan of Implementation are formulated in the weakest possible language. The central outcome was the call for governments to "*encourage and promote* the development of a 10 year framework of programmes in support of regional and national initiatives to accelerate the shift towards sustainable consumption and production..." (UN/WSSD, 2002, emphasis added). This specification is vague and does not mention aspects of strong sustainable consumption (UN/WSSD, 2002). However, even this meagre result has to be perceived as a relatively positive result in some respects: It was achieved only after long and controversial discussions about any inclusion of the issue of sustainable consumption in the Plan of Implementation. Moreover, life-cycle analysis has been included in an approved UN document for the very first time.

The consequences of the lack of specificity and stringency of requirements have fast become apparent. UNDESA decided that

Sustainable Production and Consumption would continue to appear as a cross-cutting issue in its 2004–2017 Multi-Year Programme of CSD Work and that the 2010/2011 cycle would additionally highlight the “10-year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns” as a thematic cluster. Yet, the first major conference after Johannesburg, in Marrakech in June 2003,<sup>8</sup> merely stressed the importance of de-coupling economic growth and environmental degradation through improvements in the efficiency and sustainability of resource use. Instead of a conceptual shift towards strong sustainable consumption, emphasis was placed on a strengthening of the coordination of the sustainable production and consumption activities of international organizations and major non-state actors. In addition, a series of regional meetings initiated in Marrakech failed to provide substantial changes and merely served as platforms for the exchange of knowledge. Thus, not only the past, but also the future of strong sustainable consumption governance looks bleak.

#### THE PROSPECTS FOR STRONG SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION GOVERNANCE

A theoretical framework that has gained particular prominence in attempts to explain developments in global political problem-solving (or the lack thereof) in the past decade is the global governance approach. Advocates of this approach argue that politics in a globalizing world is no longer characterized by the interaction between states as the primary political actors. Non-state as well as supra-state actors are increasingly acquiring political decision-making capacity and authority, too (Messner & Nuscheler, 1996, 2003). In particular, global governance scholars highlight new opportunities for active and to some extent autonomous roles of IGOs, business, and civil society in the design, implementation, and enforcement of standards and regulations (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992). They speak of “global governance,” i.e., global problem-solving and rule-setting that take place even though a global government does not exist. Scholars explain the rise of these new “political actors” by shifts in political capacities brought about by globalization and the simultaneous growth in (and awareness of) transnational and global problems (Scholte, 2000).

A substantial number of global governance scholars attribute significant political power to IGOs, in particular. These scholars contend

that IGOs as supranational actors have gained increasing authoritative decision-making capacity due to their ability to reach across national borders. Traditionally, IGOs have fostered the articulation and aggregation of interests, supported data gathering, analysis, and exchange, and provided a forum for negotiation and decision-making. Today, observers perceive IGO influence to be expanding beyond these traditional roles as coordinators and facilitators of international cooperation. They argue that some IGOs themselves have developed a level of rule-setting and enforcement capacity hitherto unknown (Diehl, 1997). For other IGOs, increasing interdependence has created more points of leverage, even though they may still have a limited capacity to enforce compliance (Dowty & Loescher, 1999).

Other observers highlight the weakness of IGOs. These scholars point out that IGOs are dependent on the states that are their members. States determine the budgets of IGOs and influence, if not decide, their policies and organization. The UN is a frequently cited example of the perceived weakness of IGOs in this context. Perceptions of its failures, incompetence, and dependence on uncooperative members rose in parallel to the hope and promise associated with the UN after the end of the Cold War.

The differences in the evaluation of the governance capacity of IGOs and their implications are, to some extent, a function of the focus adopted. Even the most prominent IGOs currently active in global politics differ vastly in their institutionalization and competencies. The Bretton Woods institutions have (direct or indirect) sanctioning and enforcement capacities and can substantially influence national policy choices. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), for instance, conducts detailed surveillance of the economic performance of its member states and suggests, if not requires, appropriate adjustments. Moreover, *de facto* it bestows "creditworthiness" on developing countries from the perspective of private lenders (Thomas, 2000). Likewise, the WTO's Trade Policy Review Mechanism (TPRM) involves a detailed review of all policies of countries related to trade. In combination with the dispute settlement process, it can significantly influence national policy choices (Qureshi, 1996).

The majority of IGOs, however, lack such sanctioning and enforcement capacities. In other words, they can rarely force state or non-state actors to comply with certain standards or policies, but have to rely on communication, learning, and persuasion in pursuit of their policy objectives instead. This situation applies, in particular, to IGOs



involved in global social and environmental governance. In addition, these IGOs tend to be restricted in their activities by scarce financial and human resources. In consequence, one could argue that they can only promote issues for which support from their members (governments) can easily be achieved and for which financial resources, either from governments or from business, can be obtained.

How can such a differentiated picture of the role of IGOs in global governance help us to understand the developments in global sustainable consumption governance delineated above? How does it explain that IGOs first took on the issue of sustainable consumption and that this issue initially was conceived of in broad terms, i.e., including weak and strong sustainable consumption, but then was reduced to weak sustainable consumption? Why has there been so little development in strong sustainable consumption governance since Rio?

Some participants have identified the existence of competing definitions of sustainable consumption as the major obstacles to political progress (UNEP, 2001). In contrast, it is argued here that the lack of IGO activities on strong sustainable consumption outlined in the previous section can be explained by the weakness of the relevant IGOs. As a consequence of this “weakness,” IGOs took on the issue of sustainable consumption as such, but started to restrict their focus during the early phases of issue definition due to the political sensitivity of the issue. IGOs have been shying away from a more ambitious approach because in industrialized countries, strong sustainable consumption measures would be highly unpopular with consumers, with business, and, as a consequence, with governments. Contrary to frequent claims of the increasing environmental activism of consumers and the growth of corporate citizenship – on which much hope in the more optimistic sustainable consumption literature is based – the prospects for support for strong sustainable consumption strategies from consumers and business are rather weak, as the discussion below points out. Since consumers are also voters, their opposition will reduce the inclination of governments to agree to appropriate international policy measures. Business, in turn, has obtained increasing influence on governments due to its financial and institutional resources and its increasing legitimacy as a political actor as well (Fuchs, 2005). Additionally, it has become an important source of direct support for IGOs.

*Consumers*

Some commentators postulate the existence of consumer sovereignty in the global market place, a view implying that it is solely consumers who determine production patterns. Few scholars working on sustainable consumption share this view to its full extent. After all, consumers make their consumption decisions in given social, economic, and technological contexts at micro- and macrolevel (Fuchs & Lorek, 2001; Reisch & Scherhorn, 1999; Røpke, 1999, 2001). Still, achieving fundamental changes in consumption patterns and levels would be a much easier task with the support of consumers. After all, improvements in the resource efficiency of a product have often been undermined by rebound effects.

Scholars and practitioners often proclaim a new awareness and interest in the environmental and social effects of consumption by consumers:

It is becoming more and more evident that consumers are increasingly interested in the "world that lies behind" the product they buy. Apart from price and quality, they want to know how and where and by whom the product has been produced. This increasing awareness about environmental and social issues is a sign of hope. Governments and industry must build on that (Klaus Töpfer, 23 August 1999, UNEP News Release NR 99-90).

Likewise, surveys show a high ratio of consumers concerned about the impacts of their consumption behaviour (Bentley & de Leeuw, 2000). According to UNEP's global consumer survey, 93% of consumers are, on average, aware of the impact of their consumption patterns on the environment, 60% are quite concerned, and more than 30% always or mostly consider the processes that lie behind the product (Bentley, 2000). Some consumers even adopt alternative lifestyles based on ideas and values such as simple living, the diffusion of which is fostered by global communication networks (Georg, 1999; Schor, 1998).

However, environmental, social, or sustainability values are competing with a multitude of other criteria in their influence on consumption decisions. In fact, there is ample evidence that sustainability criteria often rank low compared to competing aims. This is the case even when the question is just one of consuming a different product. When it comes to consuming less, the hurdle is even higher. After all, consumption objectives include the wish to express status, define one's identity, or establish belonging, for instance. The tendency to satisfy such needs on the basis of material consumption increases in a glob-

alized world, in which traditional social networks are increasingly disappearing, interpersonal contacts are briefer and more superficial, and personal insecurity is rising (Scholte, 2000).

In addition, it is well known that surveys frequently indicate higher levels of perceived “green” behaviour by individuals than their actions reflect. Empirical research has shown that consumers faced with a task of reducing their energy consumption, for instance, are willing to make only small sacrifices and generally fail to achieve the required level (Gatersleben & Vlek, 1998). Thus, campaigns for increasing the use of energy saving lamps may be success stories. Campaigns for the reduction of car use, however, tend to fail.

Furthermore, in the flow of global communications, “sustainability” messages are overpowered by opposing ones. The advertising industry estimates that every consumer has thousands of brand contacts per day. David may win against Goliath under some circumstances. But even those watching hopefully the development and diffusion of alternative lifestyles will have to acknowledge that these are still marginal and likely to remain so relative to the overall focus on the societal trends that support unsustainable consumption (Georg, 1999). In fact, consumption is increasingly perceived as an individual right, and pressures for the liberalization of opening hours can be noticed in countries where shops are not yet open 24 h a day. In other words, some indication of the willingness of consumers to move towards green consumption notwithstanding, there is little evidence that consumers are willing to change fundamentally or to reduce consumption for sustainability objectives.<sup>9</sup>

### *Business*

Business is supposed to be one of the major beneficiaries in shifts in political capacity from the state to non-state actors due to globalization and developments in global governance (Scholte, 2000). With respect to sustainable consumption governance strategies, business plays a particularly important role, of course. Yet, business actors tend to reject the notion that they carry any responsibility with respect to consumption levels (see section on Johannesburg above). According to representatives of the business sector, its role with respect to sustainable consumption is to promote eco-efficiency (Holliday, Schmidheiny, & Watts, 2002).

There are some reasons why business would not necessarily oppose strong sustainable consumption governance (Fuchs & Mazmanian, 1998). For instance, business may earn its profits through the selling of fewer but more expensive products with a higher profit margin (Charter & Polonsky, 1999). This familiar argument, however, may be unrealistic in terms of the ability of products to achieve distinction on the basis of quality irrespective of price. Only a limited number and type of products can be marketed accordingly. Moreover, the globalized economy is to a large extent characterized by a high level of competition in mass markets, cheap products, and correspondingly high pressures to externalize social and environmental costs (Langhorne, 2001).

Besides the higher quality argument, one could argue that the long-term welfare of society is in the enlightened self-interest of business. In this context, some scholars and practitioners point to the business measures taken to improve corporate citizenship and the sustainability of production as indications of a change in industry's environmental and social stance, for instance (Bruijn & Tukker, 2002). Observers cite the global diffusion of new business values as well as the global visibility of misbehaviour as reasons for this development and point to codes of conduct or public-private partnerships as examples of relevant measures (Smart, 1992). Critical voices, however, argue that these voluntary measures tend to perform poorly, have highlighted the lack of comprehensive improvements in actual environmental or social performance, and have questioned whether the celebrated new corporate citizenship is more than corporate "greenwash" or "bluewash" (Clapp, 1998; Gibson 1999). More importantly, in our context, these measures (in their current form) are not able to contribute to improvements in strong sustainable consumption, since they take consumption levels and ambitions as given and aim at improving corporate conduct on that basis.

Yet, there are some signals of change. Individual car manufacturers are cautiously starting to reinvent themselves as mobility providers. Some oil companies are re-conceptualizing themselves as energy providers. Yet, the majority of businesses and the structure of the economy as such clearly focus on the increased sales of consumer products. Therefore, a change towards strong sustainable consumption would have to be associated with a fundamental institutional change here. Even the introduction of eco-efficient services, i.e., the purchase of a service instead of the ownership of a good, which is the most ambi-

tious form of improvements in the efficiency of consumption, has its limits as a business strategy. Research has shown that consumers are willing to switch from the ownership of a product to the purchase of a service only in certain circumstances (Schrader, 1999).

*Governments, IGOs, and Business and Consumer Interests*

Given this lack of consumer and business support for strong sustainable consumption governance, one should not expect too much activity on the part of governments in this respect. The measures governments could introduce and support to foster strong sustainable consumption are those that politically are the most unpopular (Fuchs & Lorek, 2004). To refer to some of the examples from the beginning of the paper, governments could, of course, through appropriate tax measures and levels, raise the disincentives to travel or to consume meat. More fundamentally, governments could introduce comprehensive ecological and social tax reforms allowing full internalization of the environmental and social costs of consumption choices. Likewise, governments could switch to green accounts of the national economy, which would have the added value of highlighting the benefits rather than just the costs of strong sustainable consumption, as health costs arising from environmental damages caused by consumption choices, for instance, would then be detracted from and not added to national income.

Government intervention against the interests of voters and other powerful parties is not a common phenomenon at the best of times. In a globalized world, in which governments in industrialized countries face a legitimacy crisis due to their inability to continue to provide growth and welfare guarantees to their citizens, the adoption of politically unpopular measures that cannot be justified on the grounds of economic “necessities” is increasingly rare (Grande, 2001). In addition, governments themselves are still attached to the growth discourse and tend to foster consumption in order to foster growth. Accordingly, they probably will subscribe to the continued efforts that increase eco-efficiency though most likely, they will not agree to or pass policies that seriously transform consumption patterns or reduce consumption levels. With the aversion of consumers and business and (therefore) governments to strong sustainable consumption policies, the lack of IGO activity can easily be explained.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the superiority or added value of explanations focusing on a lack of clarity

of different concepts of sustainable consumption has yet to be proven. The recurring appearance of references to the different conceptualizations may not reflect a lack of fundamental normative and scientific consensus as much as it indicates a strategic use of relevant frames by self-interested actors.<sup>11</sup>

#### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

What will the future of global sustainable consumption governance look like? Our analysis of developments to date has shown that some efforts to improve the efficiency of consumption do exist. Thus, policy proposals promoting efficient technologies for consumer products can be expected, for instance. However, a rather significant number of scholars argue that sustainable consumption can be achieved only if consumers in industrialized countries shift consumption patterns and reduce consumption levels. As our analysis has shown, hardly any progress has been made on these issues due to constraints imposed by the global political and economic setting. Moreover, the potential for future strong sustainable consumption efforts is limited. The alignment of consumer and business interests against strong sustainable consumption measures means that both IGOs and national governments (of industrialized countries) will continue to frame sustainable consumption in terms of improvements in efficiency. In consequence, few policy proposals addressing consumption levels should be expected.

In this situation, the question is not how to design policies allowing further and maybe faster progress in sustainable consumption governance. The question has to be: How can a new area of sustainable consumption governance be opened up? For this, one of two developments will have to take place. On the one hand, the strengthening of relevant IGOs would potentially provide them with sufficient leeway to address strong sustainable consumption issues, even if they are sources of controversy for consumers, business, and therefore governments. Such a strengthening could take place in the form of a change in institutional structure and competencies. The expansion of UNEP to a Global Environmental Organization with broad competencies and sanctioning and enforcement capabilities similar to the WTO, which has repeatedly been discussed, would be one possibility in this context.

The strength of IGOs is not just a function of their institutional structures and formal sanctioning and enforcement capabilities,

however. The strength of an IGO is also a function of the willingness and ability of individuals within the organization to provide leadership. While global governance scholars are correct in questioning exaggerated accounts of a general acquisition of “new” political capacities by IGOs, even IGOs without such capacities can play important political roles. History has shown IGOs and/or the individuals leading them to be effective agenda-setters and farsighted promoters of crucial policy initiatives. In fact, IGOs sometimes seek to justify their existence precisely by forcefully pursuing new societal visions and goals. The current lack of activities by IGOs on strong sustainable consumption governance, then, is not just a function of the lack of formal competencies of the relevant IGOs. It is also a result of the cautiousness and maybe lack of vision of the relevant departments and individuals. Therefore, a smaller but related institutional change could be to move UNEP’s sustainable consumption work out of DTIE with its traditional focus on industry, and to locate it higher up in the organizational hierarchy.

The second development that potentially could foster strong sustainable consumption governance is the adoption of new political strategies by the relevant NGOs. Given the current alignment of interests against strong sustainable consumption, improved coalition building of NGOs with academia and developing countries will be needed to provide some basis for political effectiveness. Moreover, as part of their strategy, such coalitions should start a political debate about the location within IGOs of the work on sustainable consumption. Thus, they could openly question whether work on sustainable consumption should really be housed in a “Division of Technology, Industry, and Economics.” The relevance of this is demonstrated in the above discussion. Clearly, coalitions between NGOs, academia, and developing countries would still face the problem of limited capacity. For instance, the strong sustainable consumption message will still have to compete with a much larger quantity of advertising and other consumption-inducing communications in the mass media. Moreover, NGOs and academic research depend increasingly on public and financial support. Therefore, even some environmental NGOs and scholars convinced of the need to reduce consumption levels shy away from instigating such a discussion. However, despite all of these obstacles, such coalitions are likely to remain the only potentially significant driving force for strong sustainable consumption governance.<sup>12</sup>

## APPENDIX: LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABBREVIATIONS: CI – Consumers International; CDG – Carl Duisberg Gesellschaft; CSD – (United Nations) Commission on Sustainable Development; DSD – (United Nations) Division for Sustainable Development; DTIE – (UNEP) Division of Technology, Industry, and Economics; ECOSOC – United Nations Economic and Social Council; ICSPAC – International Coalition for Sustainable Production and Consumption; IGOs – International Governmental Organizations; IIED – International Institute for Environment and Development; IISD – International Institute for Sustainable Development; IMF – International Monetary Fund; (I)NGOs – (Internationally-acting) Non-Governmental Organizations; NGOs – Non-Governmental Organizations; OECD – Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; SCOPE – Sustainable Consumption Opportunities for Europe; SPAC – Sustainable Production and Consumption; TPRM – Trade Policy Review Mechanism; UN – United Nations; UNCED – United Nations Conference on Environment and Development; UNCHS – United Nations Commission on Human Settlement; UNDESA – United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs; UNEP – United Nations Environmental Programme; UNECE – United Nations Economic Commission for Europe; WBCSD – World Business Council for Sustainable Development; WSSD – World Summit on Sustainable Development; WTO – World Trade Organization

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The focus of the paper will be on industrialized countries. The situation for a large part of the population in developing countries is a very different one, of course.

<sup>2</sup> UNEP's (2001) "Consumption opportunities" report discusses these aspects in terms of "different consumption," "conscious consumption," and "appropriate consumption." It should be noted that our differentiation between weak and strong sustainable consumption as labels for different levels of ambition in sustainable consumption governance must not be confused with the familiar differentiation between weak and strong sustainable development.

<sup>3</sup> For illustrative purposes, these examples emphasize an environmental perspective on sustainable consumption.

<sup>4</sup> The subsequent revised version of the Guidelines was endorsed by ECOSOC in 1999 and adopted by the General Assembly in its decision 54/449 (see UN General Assembly Decision 54/449). In *Tracking progress: Implementing sustainable consumption* UNEP/CI reviewed the implementation of the Guidelines in 2002.

<sup>5</sup> The International Institute for Sustainable Development is a research and policy consulting institute based in Canada that aims to contribute to sustainable development by advancing policy recommendations on international trade and investment, economic policy, climate change, measurement and indicators, and natural resources management.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the Youth, SC.net, Indicators, Life Cycle Initiative, and Global Consumer Survey projects.

<sup>7</sup> With regard to the development of indicators, the OECD's stated goal was to relate available economic and environmental data to conceptual and policy work



(OECD, 1999). It failed to develop a coherent framework allowing a weighting of priorities, however, so that the policy relevance of its work on indicators necessarily remains limited. On the relevance of such a framework and the weighting of priorities in the area of sustainable consumption, see Lorek and Spangenberg (2001).

<sup>8</sup> International Expert Meeting of the “10-year Framework of Programmes for Sustainable Consumption and Production,” Marrakech, June 16–19, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> The situation is different in the case of food scares and associated health concerns, which have caused (frequently temporary) changes in food consumption patterns in some countries.

<sup>10</sup> While developing countries may be in support of governance strategies to reduce consumption levels in developed countries, there is little evidence of the formers' ability to successfully put pressure on the latter in cases in which the latter's interests truly would be hurt.

<sup>11</sup> On this idea of instrumental rationality in the strategic framing of norms, see Finnemore and Sikkink (1998).

<sup>12</sup> Note the 2004 State of the World Report (Worldwatch, 2004) which has chosen sustainable consumption as its central topic (after the 2002 report, prepared for the Johannesburg meeting, had surprisingly failed to address the issue).

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#### THE AUTHORS

Doris A. Fuchs is Professor of Political Science at the Leipzig Graduate School of Management and the Wittenberg Centre for Global Ethics, Collegienstr. 62, D-06886 Wittenberg, Germany. Fax +49-3491-466258; E-mail: doris.fuchs@hhl.de or doris.fuchs@wcege.org. The author is grateful for the support of her work on sustainable consumption by the Centre for Clean Technology and Environmental Policy at the University of Twente, The Netherlands. Sylvia Lorek is an economist and Sustainable Consumption Officer at the Sustainable Europe Research Institute (SERI), Glatzer Str. 1, D-51491 Overath, Germany. E-mail: sylvia.lorek@seri.de.