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Vera Fricke, Ulf Schrader, Victoria W. Thoresen (eds.)

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Big points of sustainable consumption and lifestyle orientation: How do they fit together?

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There is a high scientific consensus that big efforts are needed in order to reach sustainable consumption. E.g., in industrial countries we talk about 5-9 tons CO_{2eq} reduction per capita and year. But there is also a consensus in communication sciences that for the motivation of people for sustainable consumption low cost measures and step-by-step actions are needed. The paper argues that those two findings don't fit together. There is empirical evidence that there is no automatism from step-by-step action to the realization of big points. Therefore we formulate assumptions on how to bring together big points and lifestyle orientation.

Keywords: sustainability communication, sustainable consumption, consumer citizenship, LOHAS

1. Two consensual findings

In the field of sustainable consumption and the promotion of sustainable consumption there are – among others – two thesis which are common in the scientific community:

1) In order to reach sustainable consumption not only great, but fundamental efforts are needed. We call it the "great transformation Consensus" (e.g. WBGU 2011).
2) In order to reach people with sustainability communication we have to meet the people in their daily life: Step by step. We call it the "Lifestyle-Consensus".

Ad 1.) There is a high scientific consensus that great efforts are needed in order to reach sustainable consumption. We can no longer be content with relatively small reductions of all kinds of harmful environmental impacts, even more so if they are to occur at an unspecified future point. We face globally rising energy and resource consumption, as well as the proliferation of Western consumption styles in emerging economies such as Brazil, China and India. As a consequence, we face the ne-

cessity of a significant change in less than ten years to combat these developments. Accordingly, a greater reduction of energy and resource consumption is necessary to reach sustainable consumption patterns, and in this context, they are globally generalizable.

For example looking at greenhouse gas emissions: In order to abide by the two-degrees-centigrade limit (if it is not too late at all), humankind must stop its annual increase in greenhouse gas emissions between 2015 and 2020 at the latest, and then reduce them without further delay by a minimum of five percent per annum (FEA 2009a). By the middle of the 21st century, annual global emissions must not exceed half the emission levels of 1990 (Figure 1).

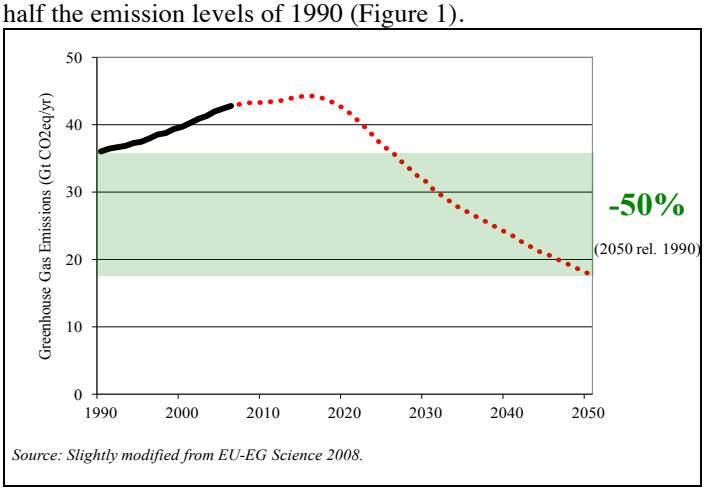

Figure 1: Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions: Actual and nominal

The efforts countries have to make to meet this target vary, as greenhouse gas emissions are unevenly distributed at present, as shown in the diagram of emissions per capita per country in Figure 2. The two-degrees-centigrade limit thus implies for Germany that its greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced by 40% by 2020 compared to 1990 levels and by 80-95% by 2050 (FEA 2009a). In Germany, this means a reduction from around 11 tons CO_{2eq} per year per person currently, to below 2 tons CO_{2eq} in 2050.

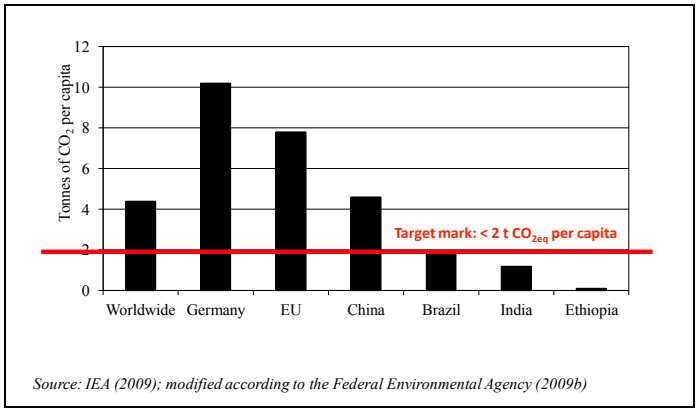

Figure 2: Per capita CO2 emissions in various countries (2007)

Ad 2.) The need of a "great transformation" may be right from a scientifically viewpoint, but reality looks different. Fundamental changes in lifestyle or routine differs from the needs and boundless possibilities people have. Since the publication of „Limits of Growth" sustainability communication is dominated by "catastrophe scenarios" and "time is running out" rhetoric while social sciences gathered new findings.

One central message of these findings is: There are different lifestyles which differ in values, behaviour patterns and readiness to act. Different consumption patterns for example have a huge effect on the carbon dioxides emissions caused by an individual. A Swiss report found that the annual greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions caused directly and indirectly by equal-income Swiss households range from 5 to 17 tonnes of carbon dioxide per person (Girod and de Haan 2009).

In order to make a change in society we have to take these different lifestyles and real life situations into account. Therefore different people need different choices, which have a certain connectivity to their lives. To reach this aim sustainability communication recommends low-cost measures and "step by step" messages. There is one key message repeatedly disseminated by consumer guidebooks and web-portals on sustainable consumption: let us s*imply* save the world (e.g., We Are What We Do 2004). They offer consumers a large range of products that will serve the "common good" once they have been purchased. Their message is that our purchasing expenditure sets an example for society and strengthens our consumer power. This message and its underlying assumptions have also been accepted in the political debate on sustainable consumption (e.g., UN DESA and UNEP 2007).

2. Lack of fit

The question we want to discuss: How can we bring together great transformation and lifestyle-orientation? We know that: the idea of transformation and sustainable consumption has reached mainstream society. As the German advisory council on Global Change (WGBU) states in its report "World in Transition" 2011, the global transformation of values has already begun. Looking at the results of the World Value Survey, for example,65.8 % of respondents (n = 68,123) stated that they would be prepared to give a part of their income if they were certain that the money would be used to prevent environmental pollution. (WBGU 2011).

Moreover, sustainable consumption has become a trend. It is no longer a niche phenomenon, and the days of ecological pioneers suffering a bad conscience when purchasing just about any good or service are long gone. Today one can feel good when consuming ecological products. The Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS) provide an apt label for this new consumption phenomenon. It is also used as a synonym to refer to practitioners of this kind of lifestyle. According to Kirig et al. (2007), LOHAS cherish the environment and want to demonstrate this through their consumption choices. They purchase such products as organic food, natural skin care, and energy-efficient household appliances.

But reality shows that this so called sustainable lifestyle of LOHAS does not lead to the CO_2 reduction needed. An analysis of the 2007 energy consumption of 24 LOHAS proponents in Germany indicated that LOHAS' consumption levels do not differ significantly from those of the German household average (Bilharz/Schmitt 2011). However, LOHAS estimated their own environmental footprint to be around 30 percent smaller than the German average. This mismatch between consumer awareness and consumer behaviour – which is well-known and portrayed (e.g., Abrahamse 2005) – thus appears to apply also to LOHAS. Representative studies by other researchers have reached similar conclusions and Stratum (2008) provides a pithy summary on it: Big changes in consumption-styles are not LOHAS' cup of tea.

Given the scale of the challenge it is evident that the current efforts of LOHAS are insufficient. Moreover, if the LOHAS lifestyle is widely perceived in society to be compatible with global sustainability, then arguments about the extent to which changes in consumption are necessary are likely to be marginalised. As we formulated in the first thesis, in industrial countries, we talk about 5-9 tons CO_{2eq} reduction per capita and year.

We think it is not only a question of time as to why they have yet to reached this goal. We think it has to do with a fundamental problem in sustainability communication. While consumption patterns in Germany, for instance, include a reduction of more than 9 tons of CO_2-equivalent per capita per year, the calculations of sustainability communication lie within a kilogram-scale. This kind of communication strategy may successfully motivate people; but it motivates them to pick just about any action. As a result, the ability of society to develop an understanding of what is

really important, both in terms of individual footprints and the transformation of societal frameworks, is systematically eroded.

Despite its inefficacy one could continue with a communication strategy that promotes small behavioural changes in the hope of spillover effects (Thøgersen and Ölander 2003). However, the above mentioned study of 24 LOHAS indicates that spillover is unlikely to trigger behavioural change that significantly reduces people's environmental footprint (Bilharz 2008). Spillover does not result in a "virtuous escalator" (WWF 2009, p. 7) that scales up from 'small' to 'large' action. Nevertheless, promoting small matters might be helpful in raising political awareness and achieving big political solutions; at least, they might not hamper them. But then why, one might ask, should we need big political solutions – such as unpopular ecological taxes – if we were able to achieve these impacts through small matters? It will be difficult for people to develop a sense for the necessity of (big) political measures if this approach is systematically undermined by promoting insignificant individual consumption patterns.

It seems that LOHAS have just such a difficulty. They ask little of politics. They understand sustainable consumption as a private matter that follows the mantra of "to live and let live". Thus, the current communication strategy of promoting small matters fuels the individualisation of responsibility and, as such, impedes the implementation of necessary (radical) political measures (Tukker 2008).

Therefore we think there is a lot of work to do to bring great transformation and lifestyle approaches together in a better way than sustainability communication has so far. Below, we will present three proposals to solve this communicational problem.

3. Aims and Visions

In most cases, there are many ways to reach a goal. It is the same for sustainable consumption. This is what the lifestyle approach tells us. But the aim of sustainable consumption is not to buy more efficient refrigerators or cars. The aim is to have nothing other than a great transformation, and in this way, the aim can be very concrete. For example: If the aim is to live climate-neutral, meaning the amount of CO_2 and other climate-damaging gases released into the environment does not cause further damage, the term "climate-neutral" does not describe an abstract concept, but a very concrete idea of shaping the future of everyday life. As mentioned above, there is a high scientific consensus what that means: Less than 2 t CO_{2eq} per capita and year. So the question is: How do we reach less than 2 t CO_{2eq}?

The sustainability communication should not only emphasize different methods, but rather a concrete aim to which these methods should lead. To put it more concrete: it is more important to talk about climate-neutral living than, for example, driving less. That means for communicational matters: we should formulate formu-

late concrete visions rather than talk about small actions. As the World Value Survey shows, people are ready for big measures.

We will not be able to orient consumers if we literally discuss everything. While the program on sustainable consumption patterns might be complex (i.e. comprising a multitude of consumption patterns and calculations of their environmental impact), our communication needs to concentrate on concise priorities – the big points of sustainable consumption - with targeted messages.

Public communication on the issue needs to reduce in complexity. It needs to concentrate on concise priorities with targeted messages. We should manage to link it with specific visions. Visions such as "100% renewable energies", "passive house", and "100% organic" have already been implemented by individual pioneers of sustainable consumption. They have unleashed valuable societal discourses rather than being taken for granted or ignored.

4. „Big Points" and „Key Points"

A broad consensus has emerged regarding priority areas and hot spots of (un-)sustainable consumption has emerged in the past years. In Germany for example, we have an average per-capita output of approximately 11 tonnes of CO_{2eq}. This is a considerable amount, and we must do our homework if Germany is to achieve the aspired reduction by 80 to 95 %. On average, 25 % of greenhouse gas emissions come from heating and electricity, 23 % from transport and 14 % from food. That leaves 28 % for other consumption and 10 % for public infrastructure (Figure 3).

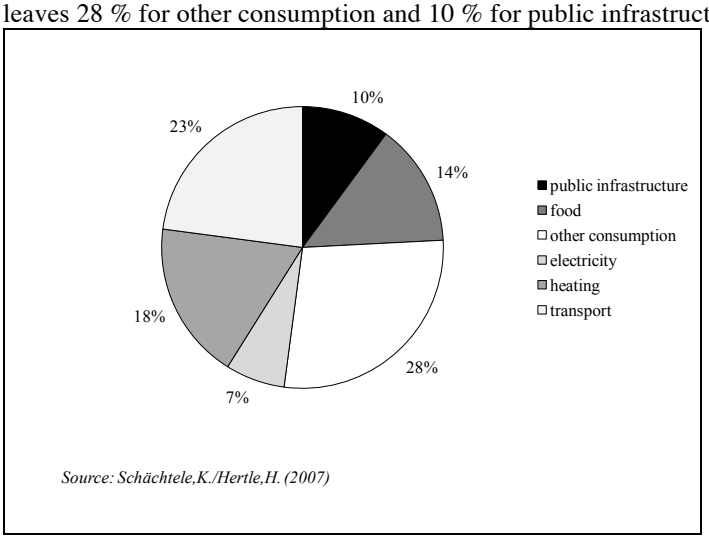

Figure 3: Average CO2eq emissions in Germany by fields of action

The items that most affect individual CO_{2eq} emissions are ("Big Points"):

- Transport – long-distance travel, distances travelled by car and the car's fuel consumption.
- Housing – size of living area and insulation standard affect energy consumption.

Food consumption also has an impact on CO_{2eq} emissions, in particular the quantity of meat consumed and the purchase of organic produce. Available income seems to have a major influence on individual greenhouse gas balances. CO_{2eq} emissions usually increase with income as people tend to live in bigger houses, travel more frequently, drive bigger cars, and consume more.

Instead of trying to turn all the features of sustainable consumption into a trend, this strategy concentrates on those measures which are most important from an environmental point of view. But when devising communication strategies, it will not suffice to simply promote such big points. Calls for people to move to smaller flats or to abandon air travel will be mostly ignored. Big points need to be implemented durably. Moreover, people will need to motivate others to follow their example because sustainable consumption will only thrive if a critical mass participates.

In addition to their environmental relevance, significant actions therefore need also to convince by their durability and high resonance within society. This is why we think sustainability communication needs to prioritize big points that can become fast-selling items and trendsetters. We call these consumption choices "key points" (Figure 4). Generally, the identification of key points will depend upon country-specific contextual factors. Nevertheless, the following generic key points need to be present in industrialized nations (Bilharz 2008): investments in renewable energies and other ecological bank deposits, compensation payments for CO_2 emission, thermal insulation (most notably with regard to low energy buildings or passive houses), driving highly efficient cars with very low fuel consumption of less than three litres per 100 kilometres, participation in car-sharing programmes and eating organic food. These measures allow individual people to achieve large reductions in greenhouse gas emissions ranging from half a ton to several tons of CO_{2eq}.

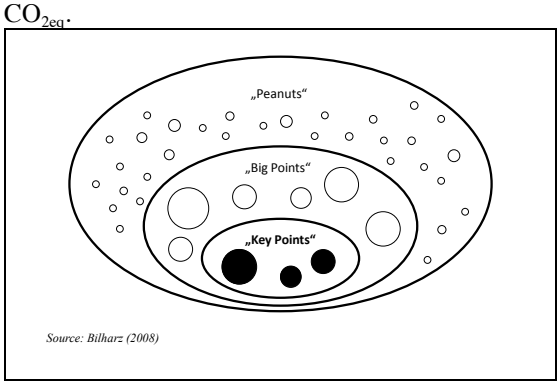

Figure 4: Peanuts, Big Points and Key Points of sustainable consumption

5. Consumer citizen and political signs of consumption

Climate protection is not just a matter for individuals. Only when public infrastructure becomes more sustainable will it be possible to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 to 95 %. What does this mean for linking the lifestyle approach to great transformation? We think there are four relevant aspects:

1) If we are talking about sustainable consumption, we have to leave out the logic of personal CO_2-calculators. Normally, CO_2 calculators only take into account the individual's own CO_{2eq} emissions, but not the encouragement of good deeds by other people. These effects, however, are important. Not only can we influence not only our own CO_{2eq} emissions, but we can influence those of other people or companies, as well. Investment in renewable energies and other investments that help the environment are direct and indirect contributions to CO_{2eq} reductions. At the workplace, a committed workforce may even reach greater CO_{2eq} reductions than the ones that are individually achievable. Social commitment (such as membership in environmental groups) could further the introduction of more environmentally friendly legislation. These fields of action illustrate in how many ways we can act in order to take the effectiveness of climate protection to a higher level. We have to talk about our roles as citizen, consumer, and employee.
2) Therefore the vision of a climate neutral life must be understood on a societal level rather than on the individual level. A lifestyle with 2 tones CO_2 per person and year is hard to achieve, while savings of 9 tones are more realistic, when taking savings of others into account. For example a capital investment of 10.000 Euro in wind power saves about 11 tones of CO_2 emissions per year in Germany. There are other examples of how to save CO_2 emissions through others, like changing to an ecological bank, making donations, or compensating your flights. This wider view of CO_2 savings benefits communication, as there are no limits to the top. The main question is: What can people change? For themselves and for others.
3) Voluntarily sustainable consumption of pioneers cannot – and does not seek to – replace policy-making for sustainable consumption. An example from Germany illustrates this: The Renewable Energy Sources Act (Erneuerbare Energien-Gesetz [EEG]) from 2000 stipulates minimum prices for electricity from renewable sources. It has been very successful and cannot be replaced by voluntary consumer action. However, such consumer engagement can help to generate precisely this kind of policy if it sends appropriate signals to policy makers. To stay with the example, consider the following: when the Energy Act was passed, only a very tiny number – less than one percent of the German population – were involved with renewable energy from solar power and wind turbines. This tiny group of people nevertheless constituted a critical mass in the end (for a discussion of critical mass theory see Oliver et al. 1985). It sufficed to create the impetus for politicians to pass a highly suc-

cessful law on renewable energies. This is what sustainability communication has to take into consideration: What and how strong are the political signs of consumer decisions? E.g., buying whole-food products can be also seen as a vote for ecologically sustainable farming, using green electricity as a vote for an energy turnaround to renewable energy sources, the use of car-sharing as a vote for a transport policy not focused on cars.

4) Considering of the political effect of consumer decisions does not neglect or downsize the importance of political action itself. This is because effective consumption in terms of structural policy can contribute to support of structural change, but surely cannot substitute an active input of formal structural changes. Considering air transport, the internalization of the external costs of air transport requires an instrument such as kerosene taxation. Instead of boycotting flights, initiative-based acting using economic instruments appears to be an appropriate strategy in this context. Focusing on sustainable *consumption* in terms of purchasing habits only tends to restrict the associative space of possible individual actions and runs the risk of fading out the responsibility of people in their role as "active citizens" (voters, association members, opinion-makers or financial supporters of sustainability organisations) (Wilhelmsson 1998; Uusitalo 2005).

6. Conclusion

As the findings from the LOHAS studies and behavioural economics showed, there is no automatism from the small to the significant measures needed to face the great transition. In this article we made some suggestions to bringing the great transformation and the lifestyle approach together differently than sustainability communication has so far. Sustainability Communication should provide people better orientation:

- By communicating aims and vision rather than small measures
- By focussing on Big and Key Points of sustainable consumption
- By emphasizing the political role of sustainable lifestyles.

Though we are aware that people may not have the opportunity or financial resources to implement big or key points of sustainable consumption, limited financial resources must not be an obstacle. Instead, financial limitations urge us to search for creative solutions to all key points, such as finding ways to enable small investors to hold shares in renewable energies (e.g., offering participation certificates through ecologically-oriented banks). Another Example: The German organisation co2online provides advice to tenants on how to convince their landlord to invest in such measures as thermal insulation. The same logic applies to opportunities for key points that are limited due to geographical availability, as is the case with car-sharing. Previously, it was available only to consumers in metropolitan areas,

but over time the service has expanded. In addition, key points represent a situational approach and can be adapted to the specific needs of different target groups. These needs may be financial in nature, geographical, or motivational in nature.

Sustainability communication cannot and should not replace necessary changes in our political frameworks. Saving the world through conscious consumption patterns will remain a visionary dream. However: it has never been as easy as it is today to personally contribute to sustainable development and to influence political decisions through personal consumption patterns. Sustainable consumption has become a trend. In that respect, the emergence and the spread of the LOHAS movement is a unique window of opportunity to empower consumers for sustainable consumption and to unite the need of a great transformation with that of lifestyle orientation. Actors in sustainability communication – such as NGOs, web communities, political institution or companies – need to use this window and focus their attention on measures most relevant for sustainable consumption and societal transformation.

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