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Going Big with Big Matters

The Key Points Approach to Sustainable Consumption

Sustainable consumption becomes increasingly important for solving sustainability problems: it can empower people to a conscious lifestyle and can pave the way for a sustainability-orientated policy making. But it is not sufficient to consume ecologically friendly products while neglecting those measures with a high environmental impact. To concentrate on so-called key points could therefore be a promising strategy for sustainability communication – but it cannot replace fundamental changes in our political frameworks.

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There is one key message repeatedly disseminated by consumer guidebooks and web portals on sustainable consumption: let us *simply* save the world (e. g., We Are What We Do 2004). They offer consumers a large range of ecological or organic products which 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).

Sustainable consumption has become a trend to which we can proudly commit ourselves. It is no longer a niche phenomenon, and the days of ecological pioneers suffering a bad conscience 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 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. It is therefore generally assumed that LOHAS have a smaller environmental footprint than other

people. But do LOHAS really show us the path to a more sustainable and globally acceptable lifestyle?

The Delusion of LOHAS: Nothing But Average

An analysis of the 2007 energy consumption of 24 LOHAS proponents in Germany suggested that LOHAS’ consumption levels do not differ significantly from those of the German household average (Bilharz 2008).¹ However, LOHAS estimated their own environmental footprint to be about 30 percent smaller than the German average. This mismatch between consumer awareness and consumer behaviour – which is well-known and portrayed (e. g., Abrahamse et al. 2005) – thus appears to apply also to LOHAS. Other representative studies have reached similar conclusions, and Stratum (2008) provides a pithy summary on it: big changes in consumption styles are not LOHAS’ cup of tea.

This leads us to the following hypothesis: LOHAS cannot be characterized by a resource-light lifestyle, but rather by their own faith in it. This faith is often based on their achievement of what we call “peanuts” of sustainable consumption. These are changes in behaviour that only generate small impacts in the field they are aimed at (e. g., reducing CO₂ emissions or the use of scarce resources). Examples for peanuts include switching off stand-by operations or buying energy-saving bulbs – all of which lead to small emission reductions only (Bilharz 2008). We suggest that the central message of consumer guides and the political debate on sustainable consumption – that of consumer empowerment

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¹ The assessment was based on an extensive questionnaire to measure total annual energy consumption.

– will be faced with severe challenges if further studies come to similar conclusions on the impact of current lifestyle changes. Because such results suggest that even target groups as LOHAS are unable to reduce their energy and resource consumption significantly below the average of western civilizations, despite their high attraction to sustainable consumption. We are in need of much greater efforts and performance, which also has to come from pioneers of sustainable consumption.

The Need for Action

From a global perspective, there is no doubt that energy and resource consumptions need to be reduced. 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, significant changes in less than ten years to combat these developments are necessary.

Using the data from the IPCC report 2007, the German Federal Environment Agency (Umweltbundesamt, UBA) has calculated that global greenhouse gas emissions need to be reduced by at least 50 percent by 2050 in order to stay within a maximum of plus two degree Celsius of global warming (UBA 2010). For industrialized countries the challenge is even greater: a reduction of 80 to 95 percent will be essential. In Germany, this translates to a drop from about eleven tons CO₂ equivalents per year per person currently to below two tons CO₂ equivalents in 2050. 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 marginalized.

Consequences for the Promotion of Sustainable Consumption

Although the conclusions of the research presented above are not surprising, they are sobering. They can be partly explained by the current fashion for communicating on sustainable consumption, which has reached a dead end: it reflects the aim to motivate people to act in the faith that the world can *simply* be saved through conscious consumption. We contend that such communication, which systematically promotes small actions, undermines people's ability to recognize that the impact of such small changes is limited when compared with other behavioural change options. In other words, people overestimate the efficacy of their efforts, and the resulting lifestyles remain unsustainable.

We now address the question of how the dead end in sustainable consumption communication can be overcome. The first step is to distinguish between three basic communication strategies.

Strategy 1: Promoting Small Matters

Despite its inefficacy one could continue with a communication strategy that promotes small behavioural changes in the hope for 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 to raise political awareness and to achieve big political solutions, or 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 for (big) political measures if this approach will be 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 to let live". Thus, the current communication strategy of promoting small matters fuels the individualization of responsibility, and as such impedes the implementation of necessary (radical) political measures (Tukker 2008). This kind of communication strategy may successfully motivate people; but it motivates them to pick just 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 being systematically eroded.

Strategy 2: Playing Down Small Matters

Against the backdrop of the criticism voiced above, sustainability communication can – in its original sense – raise awareness by playing down small matters and announcing that fundamental behavioural changes are necessary in order to create large-scale impacts. It could illustrate that measures taken by many "green consumers" do not result in lower-than-average consumption levels, despite the efforts expended. Such a communication strategy could critically question the potential scope of individual consumption behaviour, given the prevailing societal and political frameworks into which individuals are embedded. It could argue that societal frameworks cannot be changed through consumers' buying decisions, and instead ask for political measures to tackle them (cf. Grunwald 2010). Although we sympathize with this strategy, we do not believe it to be effective. It reminds of former environmental communication in the 1980s with its strong element of moral prescription. Over time it has become clear that such communication elicits negative reactions from those to whom it is addressed, and discourages them from the proposed actions (Miron 2006). The current "beyond growth" and sufficiency discourse runs the risk of repeating this mistake (see critically Jackson 2009). The efforts taken to achieve sustainable consumption are perceived as insufficient, and it is postulated that fundamental behavioural change is needed.

But the admittedly complex issue of unsustainable development does not drive people to become politically active. Individualization rather comes as a result of perceived political inertia than being its cause. Communication to LOHAS is successful because it does not seek to preach or teach; because it offers delightful shopping instead of tough political negotiation. Playing down small matters will discourage people and thus prevent precisely what this communication strategy is intended to achieve: to set up a political movement.

Strategy 3: Promoting Big Matters

The third communication strategy deals with the promotion of big matters. 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. It draws attention away from peanuts, towards big points and key points of sustainable consumption. Actors who apply to this strategy – such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or communities – repeatedly emphasize important measures in prominent places (e.g., magazines of environmental organizations). Key points will not be addressed as one option among others, but they will need to be addressed with special attention. Because big matters often ask bigger efforts from consumers, they will most probably reach fewer people and will generate less motivational impact. It furthermore bears the risk of creating resistance among consumers. However, we consider this strategy to be the most valuable, profiting from the LOHAS trend and promoting sustainable consumption.

This is what the key points approach is about: it is aimed at the critical mass instead of “the masses”.

A New Approach – Based on Key Points

Significant measures – the “big points of sustainable consumption” – mainly occur in the consumption areas of nutrition, housing, and mobility (e.g., Tukker et al. 2006). They are closely connected to issues such as thermal insulation, the size of peoples’ residence, the level of income, and the extent of automobility and air travelling. These big points constitute the major elements of our present unsustainable consumption levels. Accordingly, differences between individual households’ environmental footprints can be attributed to consumers’ performance on these big points.

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. Furthermore, 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 must also convince due to their durability and high resonance within society. This is why we think that sustainability communication needs to focus on those big points that can become fast-selling items and trendsetters. We call these consumption choices “key points”. Generally, their identification 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 CO₂ emissions, 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 liters per 100 kilometers, participation in car-sharing programs, and eating organic food. These measures allow individuals to achieve large reductions in greenhouse gas emissions – ranging from half a ton to several tons of CO₂ equivalents.

Objections

The idea of key points reflects a strategic thinking that anticipates the outcome. For industrialized countries like Germany this outcome equals a reduction of at least nine tons of CO₂ equivalents per year per person. There are three main arguments often raised against such an approach:

First, people may not have an opportunity to implement such key points of sustainable consumption. For example, they do not have the financial resources to invest in solar panels on their roof. But limited financial resources must not be an obstacle. Instead, financial limitations urge us to search for creative solutions on 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). The same logic applies to opportunities for key points that are limited due to geographical availability as it 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.² These needs may be financial in nature (limited financial resources to be spent on key points), geographical (limited access due to geographical location), or motivational (specific interests in few key points and less interest in others).

Second, sustainable consumption patterns encompass more measures than merely those addressed with key points. Consumption is a complex field of issues and activities, and a key points approach is simplistic. However, we will not be able to offer orientation to consumers if we seek to address every sustainable consumption

² The German organization co2online provides advice to tenants on how to convince their landlord to invest in such measures as thermal insulation.

pattern. Public communication on the issue has to reduce complexity. It needs to concentrate on concise priorities with targeted messages. We argue that key points are a suitable instrument for achieving this if we manage to link it with specific visions. Such visions as “100 percent renewable energy”, “energy-plus house”, and “100 percent organic” have already been implemented by individual pioneers of sustainable consumption, and have unleashed valuable societal discourses, rather than being taken for granted or having gone unheard.

Third, it is often argued that sustainable consumption needs political measures rather than promoting intrinsically motivated consumer action. Our key points approach is meant as a concept that enhances consumer empowerment. As such it 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 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 get a highly successful law on renewable energies. And this is what the key points approach is about: it is aimed at the critical mass instead of “the masses”. It intends to reach those who need a nudge rather than those who have been laggards for a long time. In other words, the key points approach can pave the way for a sustainability-oriented policy making (Lorek 2010).

Conclusion

Sustainability communication about key points cannot and should not replace essential 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 consumption patterns. In that respect, the emergence and the spread of the LOHAS movement is a unique window of opportunity to empower consumers to sustainable consumption. Actors in sustainability communication, such as NGOs, web communities, political institutions, or companies, have to use this window and focus attention on those measures most relevant for sustainable consumption and societal transformation.

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