

# Chapter 1 “Key points” of sustainable consumption

*Focusing sustainability communication on aspects which matter AND appeal*

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## 1 Introduction

It is not only the international bestseller “Change the world for a fiver” that shows that consumers obviously have the desire for advices how to make their personal contribution to sustainable development. Sustainability communication can build on this. Our paper intends to give recommendation for the practice of sustainability communication; recommendation to the consumers but foremost to those translators within public authorities and civil society who transfer scientific insights into practical advice for individual decision making. The message developed in this paper is twofold. First, it doesn't do too much good providing all sorts of advices for sustainable consumption in the same manner regardless if they target “big points” of consumption which largely matters from the sustainable point of view or if they deal with marginal “peanuts” only. Second, also praying the “big points” will quite likely miss the target if they are incompatible with the willingness and ability for consumers to change. As a solution we introduce the concept of “key points” of sustainable consumption which should be placed at the centre of communication measures. “Key points” are those “big points” which most likely will fall on fruitful ground in consumer communication.

The paper is based on two studies. The first analysed different books, booklet and brochures with (environmental) consumer advice. In the second study semi-structured interviews were conducted among selected environmentally aware consumers. Chapter 2 describes the increasing attention for the “big points” in literature. Chapter 3 explores the theoretical considerations for the identification of “key points”. In chapter 4 we introduce nine principles we regard as crucial for a successful sustainability communication. Chapter 5 summarise findings and message.

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## 2 Setting priorities

There is clearly no shortage of advice for sustainable consumption. However, there is a shortage when it comes to realising and fostering sustainable consumption by individual consumers: the money and time for it are scarce and very often the willingness to leave much-loved products on the shelves, and to change longstanding consumption behaviour is lacking. In environmental and sustainability research in social sciences much insight has been gathered so far on *why* and under which circumstances people consume (un)sustainably (see e.g.: Kaufmann-Hayoz 1996; Homburg and Matthies 1998; Røpke 1999; Sanne 2002). Likewise, many studies describe how to put across individual advices for sustainable consumption (see e.g.: Gardner and Stern 1996). An independent research discipline has been established to treat this specific question under the title of “sustainability communication” (Adomssent and Michelsen 2006).

Sustainability communication – and therefore consumer policy as a shaper of sustainability communication – is facing the same conflict as consumers do in their daily lives: a multitude of advices for sustainable consumption are confronted with limited resources of money, time and interest. The multitude of advices is causally linked to the understanding of sustainable consumption as such. Sustainable consumption commonly describes consumption patterns which reduce negative social and environmental impact during processing and consumption as compared to conventional consumption patterns without unduly reducing the individual net benefit (Belz and Bilharz 2007, p. 27). The characteristic resulting from this definition of sustainable consumption is a *relative* improvement compared to the current state of unsustainable consumption. Consequently, each individual (!) act of consumption has at minimum (!) one sustainable consumption alternative. As a result, a number of sustainable consumption alternatives arise that is scarcely manageable. The scope of the social and environmental improvements that these alternatives incorporate is very wide. Alternative concepts of mobility such as car-sharing as well as luxury automobiles that forgo the use of tropical woods for their dashboard can both be subsumed under the above definition.

The concept of sustainable consumption has been intensely used to describe what *can* be done. Now it is urgently necessary to limit the multitude of options with regard to what *needs* to be done with a high priority. Given the multitude of well substantiated “excuses” why consumers follow these (often marginal) advices but ignore other (more sustainably relevant) it appears to be sensible to focus on “things that really make a difference” (Brower and Leon 1999, p. XI; Spangenberg and Lorek 2002). If consumers do not want or are not able to do everything, they should start by doing the most relevant first. It is hardly fruitful to spread limited individual and collective resources across a large number of options which have a marginal or at least doubtful contribution to sustainable consumption. And it is the task of research to point out what the most relevant is as well as the task of relevant and interested civil society organisations to concentrate their advices on the relevant.

In order to foster sustainable consumption, academic literature has started to increasingly discuss and demand the prioritising of advices to alter consumption patterns (Lorek, Spangenberg and Felten 1999; Brower and Leon 1999; Gatersleben 2001; Lorek and Spangenberg 2001; Spangenberg and

Lorek 2002; Jungbluth, Emmenegger and Frischknecht 2004; Kaenzig and Jolliet 2005; Tukker et al. 2006). Up to now, the prioritising of advices is mostly based on life-cycle assessment and environmental accounting. The consumption areas of housing, mobility and food are identified to be the prior areas in which improvements are needed (Tukker and Jansen 2006). On this basis the aspects of sustainable consumption can be derived that really matter. We refer to them as the “*big points*” of sustainable consumption and distinguish them from so called “peanuts”. Peanuts represent all those activities with only marginal relevance for a consumers or households sustainability performance, however enthusiastic and prominent they are praised in sustainability communication so far. “Big points” are consumption alternatives which allow for particularly high reductions in resource use (e.g. insulation, investments into renewable energy). As concerns these “big points” of sustainable consumption, there is substantial consensus in the academic world. Especially for individuals sustainable consumption can be realised by adopting only few of those “big points”.

For the area of sustainability communications – being generally ill-equipped with financial and human resources – this opens a number of strategic opportunities. Instead of giving 100s of advices for sustainable consumption behaviour equal attention and keeping all sorts of sustainability issues alive with rather negligible success, concentrating on a few “big points” of sustainable consumption can help to increase appreciation and probability of success enormously.

However, the formulation of priority-based lists does not automatically make statements on the likeliness of their implementation. Regarding their objectives, such lists define sensible but not necessarily accepted goals. Changes of the “big points” need to be *wanted*, too. If sustainability communication sets on the wrong issues in this case, the strategy of setting priorities can backfire on its original objectives. Rather than portraying innovative activities for sustainable consumption, spectres will be created which attach negative instead of positive associations to sustainable consumption patterns (e.g. the demand to only fly with airplanes on holiday every five years). Therefore, it should be the aim of sustainability communication to, for example, market those “big points” of sustainable consumption pro-actively which can be expected to generate high resonance and diffusion within society. At the same time, issues which cause resistance among a large number of consumers should be faded from the spotlight and have to be tackled instead with other instruments than information and communication.

Therefore the identification of “big points” is an important step in the assessment of advices for sustainable consumption. However, further steps of analysis need to follow. Generally speaking, there is the need to identify those “big points” where needs, opportunities and ability already exist to a high degree to take them up in consumer decisions and daily routines.<sup>1</sup> We call those advices to which this definition applies the “*key points*” of sustainable consumption. They encompass the opportunity to diffuse broadly into space and time and have the greatest possible potential to change

<sup>1</sup> For a distinction of the NOA concept in the area of sustainable consumption see Gatersleben and Vlek (1994).

unsustainable structures<sup>2</sup>. It needs to be taken into account that consumption decisions themselves have the potential for structural change. Investment decisions – for example – change the formal basic conditions of individual consumption. Also, consumption decisions impact upon other consumers as well as companies and thus influence either the reproduction of existing structures or set incentives for new ones. Both of these structural impacts ought to be optimised through a focus on appropriate consumption decisions.

Some first approaches which exceed simple prioritising in the sense of “big points” can be found in the expert verdicts of Nill et al. (2002), Spangenberg and Lorek (2003) and Kaenzig and Joillet (2005). However, these authors confine themselves primarily to the question of whether and when “big points” provide a financial benefit for consumers under the given circumstances. In addition to this, there is a lack of applicable strategies which allow for a definition of “key points” within varying contexts (e.g. on a local, regional or national level). This is however of great importance because “key points” – in contrast to “big points” – very much depend on the individual preconditions of the actors concerned as well as their particular basic conditions. In that context, the question is not *whether* consumers are relevant actors but which relevant contributions consumers can make and are supposed to make. The following section will provide an assessment strategy that helps to answer this question.<sup>3</sup>

### 3 From “big points” to “key points”

The selection of concrete advices for sustainable consumption, which are supposed to form the content of sustainability communication and which ought to function as catalysts for a change of elementary consumption patterns, requires complex reasoning. This is why we developed a strategic framework which allows for the selection of appropriate content for sustainability communication and at the same time exceeds previous approaches to prioritising advices. In order to do so, we established four perspectives of success as well as three assessment dimensions which merge into nine assessment principles. In addition, we identified an initial set of “key points” through an exploratory study on the basis of our strategic framework.

#### 3.1 Perspectives of success

In a first step, we established four perspectives of success (Figure 1). They point to the key requirements which the strategic framework has to fulfil. At the same time, they represent the conceptual basis of the strategic framework.

<sup>2</sup> According to Giddens, structure comprises both formal structures (e.g. contracts, technological or socio-economic systems) as well as informal aspects (interpretive schemes, informal norms, authoritative resources) (Giddens 1984). Consequently, the structural embedding of sustainable consumption in daily routines can be realised through both the change of formal structures (e.g. tax on energy usage) as well as the change of informal structures (e.g. change in the perception of needs).

<sup>3</sup> For more detail see Bilharz 2008.

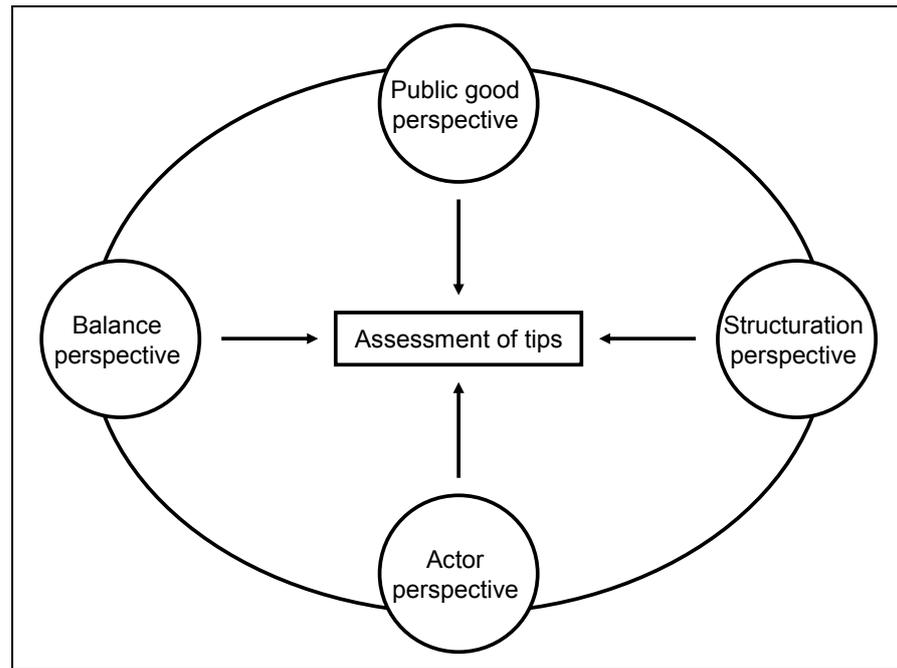


Figure 1: Four perspectives of success to foster sustainable consumption

- *Balance perspective*: The implementation of individual advices of sustainable consumption does not guarantee a sustainable level of consumption (i.e. that can be globally unified). Success therefore does not manifest itself in individual examples but rather can only be measured with a view to the overall impact of the actions. The precondition for doing this is the comparability of different actions amongst themselves. The basis of our understanding, therefore, is a resource-based view of sustainable consumption. In this way, the comparability of the use of the environment and natural resources is the minimum condition in order to determine sustainable consumption (Bilharz 2008, pp. 64-77).
- *Public good perspective*: Sustainability challenges are a collective problem. Therefore sustainable consumption starts with individually suitable activities. But the success of sustainable consumption, or rather measures to foster sustainable consumption can only be judged according to its contribution to collective changes.
- *Structuration perspective*: Collective changes will only occur if the structure of socio-ecological dilemmas is appropriately adapted (Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997, pp. 425-429). Success is said to follow from structural changes. Therefore, sustainable consumption is not about activating the “right behaviour within false structures” but it is about activating the “right behaviour to change false structures”. The theory of structuration (Giddens 1984) points to the fact that consumption decisions can be viewed from a structural policy perspective.
- *Actor perspective*: In order for an advice to have an impact, it needs to be implemented. This requires attention being paid to individual preconditions and restrictions on an individual’s actions. Only if actors want to consume sustainably sustainable consumption will occur.

In summary, the assessment of advices for sustainable consumption is twofold: it is political (public good perspective and structuration perspective) and it is strategic (balance perspective and actor perspective). The political side of it stems from its normative demand which explicitly aims at changing the behaviour of others as well as changing relevant structures. This statement is in no way trivial. Particularly the common parlance of (sustainable) *consumption* has a tendency to blur this demand (Bilharz 2008, pp. 288-296). The assessment is strategic in nature because it consistently argues in terms of the stated goal (balance perspective) and puts existing measures in relation to this aim (actor perspective).

### 3.2 Assessment strategy for “key points”

In order to identify potential “key points”, we developed an assessment strategy in a second step. The strategy comprises three dimensions of assessment: “Environmental relevance”, “individual durability”, and “sociatal impacts” (Figure 2), from which nine rules of assessment can be deduced (Table 1).

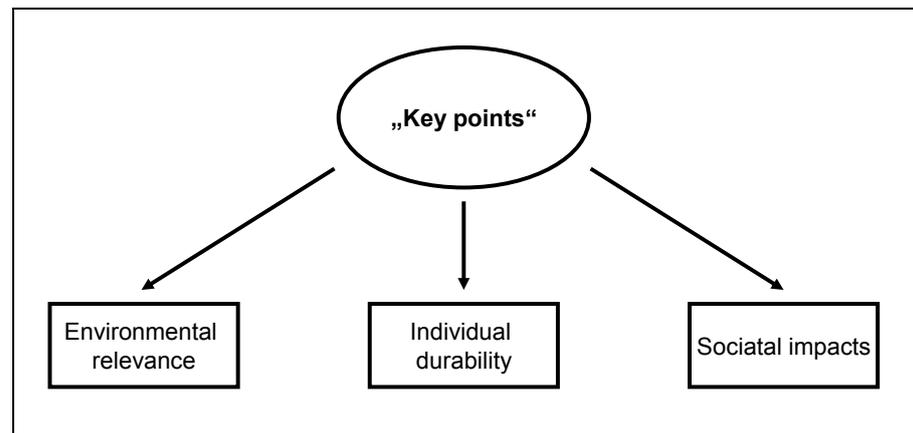


Figure 2: Dimensions of assessment of “key points”

“Key points” are characterised by their high relevance. In that sense, they can similarly be described as “big points” of sustainable consumption. The relevance stems from a high reduction potential on the one hand (e.g. in terms of energy) and from a small interpretative scope on the other hand. Only the advice which still has a great reduction potential following a careful interpretation can prevent “big points” from being reduced to “peanuts” once they are implemented in practice. Additionally, a “key point” is not a passing craze, but is rather characterised by a high probability of being implemented in the long term. This may be ensured by a greater net benefit of an act of sustainable consumption as compared to other consumption alternatives or it may be fostered by impeding a reversion to previous consumption patterns. The latter is characteristic for those advices which focus on investment decisions. Finally, “key points” genuinely affect other people and also transform collective structures. Differing aspects need to be considered in this case. In order for advices to affect others, they need to be visible in their implementation. Rather than opposing existing (global) trends, “key points” run ahead of future trends. This is made easier by the

potential of “key points” to realise economies of scale. The implementation of “key points” helps to transform relevant structures which have so far hindered (more) sustainable consumption. By supporting structural partners this impact is strengthened.

Table 1: Dimensions, criteria and rules of assessment

Dimensions	Criteria	Rules
Environmental Relevance	Reduction potential	The greater the reduction potential, the better!
	Interpretative scope	The smaller the interpretive scope, the better!
Individual durability	Net benefit	The greater the individual net benefit, the better!
	Individual context	The more irreversible individual changes in structure are, the better!
Sociatal impacts	Visibility	The greater the visibility, the better!
	Trend potential	The greater the potential to become a trend, the better!
	Scale effects	The greater the perceived scale effects, the better!
	Structural effects	The more relevant the collective structure affected, the better!
	Structural partners	The greater the activation of structural partners, the better!

### 3.3 Empirical specification

In order to identify “key points” of sustainable consumption according to the strategic framework described above, it is necessary to consider aspects of long-term embedding as well as the external impacts alongside the issue of the advice’s relevance. While “big points” may be identified with the methods of environmental accounting and life-cycle assessment, thus having an equal validity for all human beings, the long-term embedding in daily routines as well as the impact something achieves on others are highly dependent on subjective factors (e.g. personal preferences and values, possibilities to realise change, social context). For a first determination of “key points” we thus conducted an exploratory survey among environmentally aware consumers. With semi-structured interviews we analysed the subjective assessment criteria for “key points” among a selected group of ‘Friends of the Earth’ members in more depth (Bilharz 2008, pp. 225-317). During the interviews, we enquired different aspects and experiences of the interviewees with regard to implementing “big points” of sustainable consumption. This helped us to identify first insights on how well-suited certain “big points” are for sustainability communication.

On one hand, those topics most hotly disputed were identified in order for them to be covered by sustainability communication – all of these “hot potatoes” covered the aspect of sufficiency. Proposals that suggest consumers to, for example, give up their own car, live in reduced living space or to refrain from airline travel found little approval even among aware consumers. These “sufficiency” advices do not only pose problems for the interviewees regarding implementation. Also communication to others can cause great difficulty. This could be observed independent from the fact that these advices not only reduce resource use to a great extent but also lead to considerable financial savings for the individual consumers. On the basis of

our interviews, we found that a change of unsustainable consumption patterns initiated by consumers themselves cannot be expected in this area. Rather, it seems to be much more necessary to reduce the resource use of unsustainable consumption patterns via influencing structures. It is not the consumer but the citizen and those political institutions legitimised by him or her which hold primary responsibility for changes of the consumption patterns described above.

However, the interviews also helped to identify those advices for sustainable consumption where consumers are willing to listen and act. As “key points” of sustainable consumption we could derive: insulation (particularly concerning old buildings and lodging), investments in renewable energies, energy-efficient cars (3-litre car) and – with some limitations – car-sharing and the purchasing of organic food. Current framework conditions allow sensitised consumers to attain personal benefits from such sustainable consumption decisions already today. These benefits are furthermore acknowledged by colleagues, friends and neighbours. The issues mentioned find resonance, stimulate communication within personal circles and thereby enable further diffusion as concerns discussions on sustainable consumption as well as the development of related products.

The “key points” identified are primarily linked to technological innovations (insulation, renewable energies, and energy-efficient cars) or aspects of healthy living (organic food). In addition, it seems that they involve product features which are of no particular importance in the distinction of specific lifestyles. As opposed to a whole food or vegetarian diet, consumption alternatives such as the sourcing of green electricity, the insulation of houses or consuming organic food can be seen as being diagonal to existing lifestyles. This stems from the fact that an ecological adaptation of products does not infringe the products’ basic usefulness nor does it circumscribe the manifold characteristics of specific lifestyles (e.g. convenience products).

Even though some of these measures are not even implemented by sensitised consumers, the interviews showed that the measures do show a potential trend for the future. Any communication activities in these areas will fall on fertile ground – thus “setting the ball rolling” with relatively little effort.

#### **4 Nine principles for successful sustainability communication**

As we have described so far, making “any sort” of advices a good sustainability communication is not sufficient for the long-term embedding of sustainable consumption. It is much more a case of – and this is the key message – foregrounding such action advices for sustainable consumption that really make a difference to conventional, non-sustainable consumption. To this end, a strategic focus and the setting of priorities are indispensable. Possibilities for acting in the interests of sustainable consumption have to be differentiated according to their importance and the available means of sustainability communication have to be applied correspondingly. It is thus not “just” a case of creating good campaigns in themselves, but rather creating good campaigns for relevant matters. In the process, all assumptions and conclusions outlined here in the “key points” do not have to be followed in detail as a matter of course. At the same time, one cannot forego deter-

mining focal points or changing the emphasis of focal points. We have summarised them in the form of nine principles.

#### 4.1 The most important thing first! (instead of “It’s all important!”)

In supporting sustainable consumption it is not enough to hope for the “effect of many small steps”. Rather, it needs to be much more a case of learning to differentiate between effective steps and less effective steps and to embed these in support measures as the focal points (Thøgersen 2005). A starving child who receives no education needs both food and education. But to be able to survive, it first of all needs something to eat. In the practice of sustainability communication to date, setting priorities in this sort of way cannot really be observed. Instead the idea of “It’s all important!” continues to spread itself actively and successfully in many cases in contrast to the idea of “The most important thing first!”, thereby preventing a strategically sound selection of action options for sustainable consumption. This is not only due (in our conjecture) to a multiple lack of expertise in organising consumption advices hierarchically – as also shown in our interview-based study with sensitised consumers (Bilharz 2008, pp. 225-317) –, but is also the result of an emotional connection to the hope that little things can have big effects. Therefore the realisation of the idea of “The most important thing first!” requires the rejection of two misunderstandings:

1. The idea of “The most important thing first!” is not an argument for “talking down” the contribution of consumers. On the one hand, individual efforts in the course of everyday activities always remain “small” from a global perspective; on the other hand it cannot be denied that the problems associated with global consumption can only be reduced when the everyday consumption patterns of those people in industrialised countries fundamentally change. It is not therefore a question of a basic criticism of the “small steps”, but is rather a question of a differentiated perspective of “large small” and “small small” steps towards sustainable consumption. Exactly this can create motivation against the background of global challenges if it is seen that “big things” can really be achieved in miniature – and this also to one’s own benefit.
2. The “peanuts” of sustainable consumption will not fundamentally change our consumption style. That is a fact. However this does not make “peanuts” automatically superfluous or even bad. One will continue to turn out the light when leaving a room and turn off the computer when it is not needed. Realisation of or the demand for “peanuts” becomes problematic when it takes up the available means (money, time, attention) to the extent that these means are lacking for the realisation or advertisement of the “big points” or “key points”. Thus we are not proposing that “peanuts” be completely removed from awareness, but rather that by means of a greatly changed set of priorities the deployed means can be applied according to the importance of individual measures. It is clear that, for example, attention always has to be paid (but not only) to different target groups. For instance, initiating events with children and young people on the topic of car-sharing does not promise much success. To be sure there are many important and less important starting points for supporting sustainable mobility in the case

of children and young people. Above all, however, it is the case that “peanuts” are already being communicated by many other actors “on the side” independently of the efforts of the key sustainability actors (e.g. in daily newspapers).

The shift from “It’s all important!” to “The most important thing first!” can be further concretised in three ways: by a resource-orientated approach, by focusing on priority advices and by the privileging of investment advices, as detailed in the following.

#### 4.2 Thinking in terms of resources (instead of a disorientated “mixture of everything”)

There is another important reason why the idea of “The most important thing first!” leads to realisation difficulties in the practice of sustainability communication. In the transition from ecological to sustainable consumption, the term became more diffuse, the number of criteria to be taken into account increased and the amount of possible advices multiplied as a result. However, the more aspects and dimensions that have to be taken into account in an assessment, the more difficult becomes the setting of priorities because one doesn’t only have to compare “apples with pears”, but has to now suddenly compare “apples with potatoes and milk”, too. It is not very helpful, therefore, to lump together all that is desirable in the term of sustainable consumption and thereby make setting priorities impossible in the practice of sustainability communication. As a consumer one cannot take all “one and global problems” into account.

A more elegant solution to this dilemma is a more resource-orientated access to sustainable consumption (Bilharz 2008, pp. 64-77). To this end the central goal of sustainable consumption is to reduce the consumption of natural resources and decrease damage from using the environment as a sink.<sup>4</sup> This sharpening of the concept of sustainable consumption does justice to both the global dimension of the sustainability concept and the requirement of taking all three sustainability rationale (the ecological, economic and social) into account in an integrative manner (ibid.). Without a doubt sustainable consumption can also involve other aspects or “doing good” in other areas. But these aspects are of secondary importance as long as consumption advices do not also fulfil the criteria of fairness in terms of resources, i.e. being consistent with a distribution of resources that is globally fair.

The resource-orientated approach makes the transition easier from ecological to sustainable consumption, given that the integration of the social dimension in previous environmental communication has not been convincingly successful up to now and seems to be “artificial” in many cases. This can be explained by many of the social issues relevant to a global perspective are largely already being politically handled in industrialised countries. In contrast, the integration of the social dimension does not represent a problem in the case of a resource-orientated approach. This is because the intersection of social and ecological advices is already very great in this regard (ibid.). On the one hand the resource-orientated approach has the advantage for sustainability communication of enabling clear priorities to be

<sup>4</sup> For a details conceptualisation how resource use (energy, material, land) is related to main environmental problems see Spangenberg and Lorek 2002.

set. On the other hand it prevents sustainability communication having to try in vain to search for the social in the ecological advices that were formerly made central themes. Focusing on the consumption of resources also makes the assessment of consumption advices easier for consumers.

#### 4.3 Priority advices (instead of priority consumption areas)

The usefulness of the resource-orientated approach is shown in the discussion about priority consumption areas. If the reasons for banishing priority consumption areas are considered, it becomes clear that they primarily follow the resource-orientated approach just outlined. At the same time, it needs to be emphasised that the clustering of traditional environment consultancy (waste, electricity and water consultancy) only have minimal overlap with priority consumption areas. There is after all extensive agreement that building/living, mobility and food are to be regarded as priority demand areas for sustainable consumption (Tukker and Jansen 2006, p. 167).

The determination of priority consumption areas can, however, only constitute the first step on the way to determination of priority action. This is because there are also “peanuts” in priority demand areas. The relevance of this theoretical consideration has been empirically underlined in an analysis of “consumer advice” handbooks for sustainable consumption by Bilharz (2008, pp. 195-224). For example, the consumption area of housing subsume a huge variety of all different marginal aspects from switching to energy saving light bulbs and avoidance of stand-by mode via using clothes washers as sparingly as possible to buying highly efficient appliances while the “big points” are thermal isolation, efficient heating (or cooling) systems and adequate room temperature. In general approx. 60% of the advices in the handbooks analysed are attributable to the priority demand areas but only around 6% of the advices target towards “big points”. Most of the advices even in the priority consumption areas have a “peanuts” character. In spite of increased focus on the priority consumption areas in the handbooks, an orientation towards priority advices is not observable. It would be fatal if sustainability communication remains at the halfway stage in setting priorities. Instead of prioritising the relevant consumption areas only, it has to consistently focus on priority advices.

#### 4.4 Fostering investments (instead of foundering due to routine)

In the analysis of the “consumer advice” handbooks it became apparent that “big points” largely, but not exclusively, involve investment behaviour – in contrast to the entirety of the advices for sustainable consumption (Bilharz 2008, pp. 214-216). Focusing on “big points” or “key points” almost automatically has the prioritisation of investment advices as a consequence. This “inevitability” is in accord with theoretical considerations towards the long-term embedment of sustainable consumption (ibid., pp. 181-183; Gardner and Stern 1996, pp. 256-266). By means of the change in individual basic conditions, investments make the realisation of sustainable consumption possible virtually “by themselves”. For each single action it no longer has to be weighed up whether it is sustainable or not, or whether one selects the sustainable or the non-sustainable consumption option. The return to non-sustainable consumption patterns requires additional expenditure. Investment

advices can generally be interpreted in fewer ways than routine-based advices. The more (less important) ways in which a advice can be executed, the greater could be the danger that abstract demands come to nothing since they can be “fulfilled” by simple and/or symbolic actions. Ultimately the change in objective basic conditions enables a more objective control of success and a visible action. Instead of the simple one-off realisation of routine-based advices, sustainability communication should thus place greater emphasis on the agreeable long-term realisation of sustainable consumption by investments.

#### 4.5 Targeting the critical mass (instead of “fizzling out” in the masses)

When does an advice become a sure-fire success? When does sustainability communication become superfluous? Against the background of the low provision of means for sustainability communication which are mostly only guaranteed in the short term, these questions are especially significant. Generally the answer is: an advice becomes a sure-fire success when it reaches a critical mass (Oliver, Marwell and Teixeira 1985). In terms of structural policy this is the case when the structures have changed so that the additional impulse for the maintenance of behaviour arising from sustainability communication becomes superfluous. This is already an important insight. In the implementation of measures of sustainability communication, it is not a question of reaching the majority of consumers in general, but rather reaching a *critical* mass. Against this background the argument that one can reach more people with simple advices needs to be re-considered. If only the realisable saving potential is considered, it is immaterial whether one tries to reach 1,000 consumers via a “50 kWh” advice<sup>5</sup> or only five consumers via a “10,000 kWh” advice<sup>6</sup>. The saving potential amounts in both cases to 50,000 kWh even if in the second case only 0.5% of the consumers were required compared to the first option (Figure 3).

However “advices for all” have several disadvantages. Such advices are already being put into practice by a large number of people. This leads to high scattering losses. Self-evident truths are being communicated to many people. The consumers who do not yet realise simple advices are distinguished by low involvement. This means that they cannot or can hardly be reached by means of sustainability arguments (Niva and Timonen 2001, p. 337). A lifestyle-based campaign is only partly a way-out. On one hand addressing a broad spectrum of consumers, who have varied types of lifestyles, makes different communication strategies necessary. On the other hand there are empirical findings suggesting that target group optimised campaigns often reach the “already converted” which are so to see again the “wrong ones” (Schötz et al. 2003, p. 18). A further problem appears with promoting “peanuts”. Even in the perception of interested consumers sustainably consumption behaviour is often linked to “peanuts” shifts. This was confirmed in the interviews. Free association of activities for sustainability brought up the less important aspects first. Only after introducing some “big points” sustainable consumption was increasingly associated with

<sup>5</sup> For example turning off the stand-by facility on the television and DVD player all year round.

<sup>6</sup> For instance heat insulation of a detached family house.

other “big points”, too. Through increased focus on “big points” in the place of small measures, it is possible that people would increasingly connect “big points” with sustainable consumption.

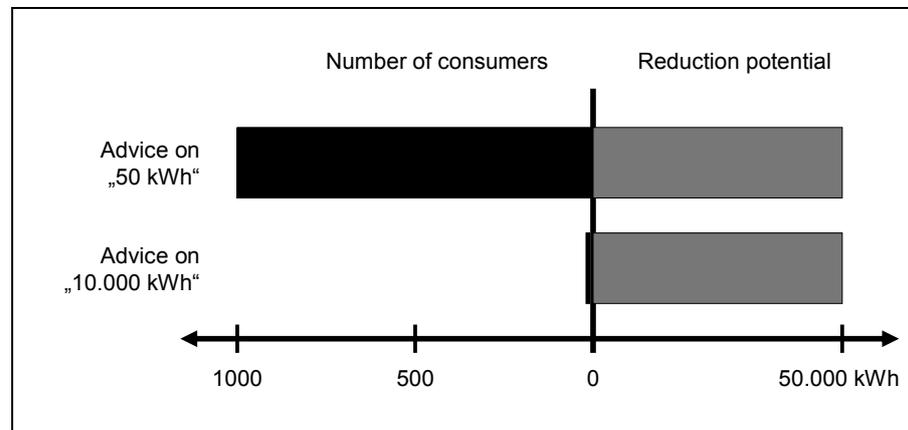


Figure 3: Necessary number of consumers for the same saving potential

The idea of the critical mass can also be further concretised. This shall be undertaken in the following using four further aspects: practising structural policy, the incorporation of further actors, the use of windows of opportunity and positive examples of action.

#### 4.6 Practising structural policy (instead of preaching about a change in values)

The challenges of sustainable consumption in terms of generalisable consumption patterns are tremendous (Gardner, Assadourian and Sarin 2004). It is not simply a case of small corrections, but rather substantial changes in consumption patterns. Against this background appealing for critical reflection of consumer needs and demands according to a fundamental change in values is understandable, as it currently characterises the debate about sustainable consumption in the area of consumer policy (e.g. Tukker et al. 2006). However, independently of how desirable such a change in values would be, demanding it remains a measure without impact due to its abstractness (Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997, p. 414). As our interview-based study was able to demonstrate, it is fundamental to sustainability communication that sensitised consumers also (re-)consider “normal” cost-benefit perceptions. Therefore an abstract value discussion or a consumer-policy information strategy comes up short as long as the basic conditions carry on punishing instead of rewarding sustainable consumption. A social change in values cannot simply be arranged, but is rather in continual interaction with realised action (Priddat 1998, p. 151). Action is influenced however by a multitude of structures and not only by (abstract) values (Jackson and Michaelis 2003; Michaelis and Lorek 2004). Values are a specific structural variant, but only one and probably in most cases one with little influence. Therefore sustainability communication should concentrate on concrete structural policy instead of postponing it to abstract value discussions (Thøgersen 2005). In the place of appealing for fewer journeys

by aeroplane, for example, it would be more constructive to foreground the central structures that continue to stimulate air transport. This involves two points:

*Viewing consumption through the lens of structural policy:*

Not every advice for sustainable consumption is also effective in terms of structural policy. For instance, other authors regard the transformation effect of “critical air transport consumption” as rather low (Brockhagen and Bals 2004, p. 27). It is thus useful to analyse the structural transformation potential of consumer decisions. On the one hand individual structures are involved – investment decisions, for example, change the formal basic conditions of individual consumption. On the other hand collective structures are affected too – consumer decisions also have an effect on other consumers or organisations such as companies, thereby influencing the reproduction of current structures. Both structural-political effects need to be optimised by focusing on suitable consumer decisions (“key points”).

The consumer does not necessarily have to be conscious of these aspects of action. The actor must not and cannot look at all of the structural moments reproduced by his action. But sustainability communication must be conscious of the side effects of this action in the assessment of advices for sustainable consumption or has to make assumptions about this. Analogously the increase in political and strategic emphasis does not refer to this execution, but rather to the selection of advices. It is not always necessary for someone who has invested in renewable energies to also want to achieve an energy transformation towards renewables. However it is decisive for sustainability communication that his or her investment has an effect in this direction.

It seems important at this point to point out that the influence of “key points” on structures is not one-way. The successful diffusion of the “key points” of sustainable consumption likewise changes these or the conditions of their realisation. The success of organic products changes, for example, not only the conventional food trade, but also the specialist organic trade (Gerlach and Spiller 2006, p. 143). Thus a conventionalisation can be observed in the organic market, which is both cause and effect of the increased demand for organic foods (Brand 2006, p. 253). Putting it in more exaggerated terms, the specialised organic trade, the idealistic farmer and the idealistic owner of a wind power plant are becoming marginalised. When “real” money can be made with sustainable products and services, the profiteers also come along, who in turn have to be legislatively “restrained” (e.g. in the form of regulations for the minimum distances of wind power plants from residential buildings). This leads onto the next aspect.

*Increasing the value of initiative-based action:*

Consideration of the political effect of consumer decisions is not allowed to lead to neglecting political action itself. This is due to the fact that consumption that is effective in terms of structural policy can contribute to support of the changing of structures, but can surely not substitute for active input of formal structural changes. If we stay with the example of air transport, it can be said that the internalisation of the external costs of air transport requires an instrument such as kerosene taxation. This does not become

more probable as a result of avoiding air travel.<sup>7</sup> Not sustainable consumption, but rather initiative-based acting for legislative regulations would seem to be a more appropriate strategy in this context. Development of the significance and necessity of initiative-based acting as well as of the boundaries of sustainable consumption also has to be firmly embedded in the scope of sustainability communication aimed at supporting sustainable consumption – instead of being a fringe topic as is the case, for instance, in most “consumer advice” handbooks. This is because focusing on sustainable *consumption* tends to restrict the associative space of possible individual actions, as our interview-based study made clear. At the same time one runs the risk of the responsibility of the people as “active citizens” (voters, association members, opinion-makers or financial supporters of sustainability organisations) fading into the background (Wilhelmsson 1998; Uusitalo 2005; Reusswig et al. 2008).

#### 4.7 Incorporation of further actors (instead of many actors who go it alone)

In terms of education, sustainability communication can hardly count upon support from sensitised consumers since they show little ambition to actively have an effect on the consumer decisions of others (Bilharz 2008, p. 295). Sustainability communication of individual actors therefore requires other supporters such as associations or companies who profit from sustainable consumption. However, it should be taken into consideration that the means for measures of non-commercial sustainability communication are extremely scarce in comparison to expenditure in commercial marketing. It is therefore constructive to foreground such action advices which could become successes on the basis of the companies’ own interests (e.g. the heat insulation of houses instead of advice about heating behaviour, renewable energies instead of pleas for electricity saving). In this way the identified “key points” show similarly-inclined actors the direction – actors who can help lead the way out of the multi-faceted dilemmas of non-sustainable consumption.

In addition, topic-specific starting points for multi-actor programs in particular ensue for consumer policy on a state level. For example in the area of thermal insulation energy-contracting for the energy conservation of public buildings is conceivable, as is a cooperation between the agency for the protection of historical monuments and the building and construction industry for the further development of energy-saving acts or a cooperation with tenant associations with regard to passing on the costs of measures for energy conservation onto monthly rent. In the context of investments in renewable energies, consumer protection organisations could work together with financial service providers in order to push development beyond the eco-niche criteria for the standardisation and quality assurance of financial products in this growing market. How the chances arising for small investors on the basis of feed-in tariffs for renewable energies (such as the Renewable Energy Sources Act in Germany; Wüstenhagen and Bilharz 2006) could be

<sup>7</sup>The opposite is rather likely to be the case. When demand falls, saving measures are threatened by the airline companies, i.e. also job cuts. Under these conditions the parallel introduction of a kerosene tax (which means air transport would become more expensive) is probably an even less enforceable policy.

guaranteed and extended in the continuation of such acts would need to be examined in cooperation with the finance ministry. In the case of the “3-litre car” the cooperation of (large) transport associations and the car industry would be tenable for stimulating a collective demand for fuel-saving models in terms of, for example, prototyping (Neuner 2000). Many further promising approaches for supporting the “key points” of sustainable consumption are conceivable. Which specific measures on the part of individual actors can and should be concretely taken in these areas would have to be determined in further detailed analyses. Moreover the concrete possibilities of individual measures (or sets of measures) would need to be further investigated with a view to possible actor alliances and current scopes for action. The parallel incorporation of different actors is decisive since it is precisely the irregularity of the measures of individual actors that leads to means being used highly inefficiently. As a result many measures do not reach the critical mass and do not therefore become successes.

#### 4.8 Creating and using windows of opportunity (instead of hoping for better times)

Strategic consumer decisions (such as choice of residential location) largely determine individual resource consumption in the long term (Bodenstein, Spiller and Elbers 1997). The same applies on a social level for the path dependency of many technical developments. It is precisely in the context of a change in non-sustainable structures that the change of strategic consumer decisions and support of path-changing innovations acquire high significance (Nill and Zundel 2001). So-called “windows of opportunity” often determine how successful the realisation is (*ibid.*, pp. 154-157).

Sustainability communication should therefore both identify and actively prepare for windows of opportunity (such as the BSE crisis or discussions about climate change) in order to be able to successfully position corresponding communication measures (e.g. with regard to the organic label or the planned eco-tax reform). A current window of opportunity for a path-changing innovation is the subject of renewable energies. Alongside the generally high approval of renewables (Allensbach 2003), the Renewable Energy Sources Act in Germany and similar acts in other countries such as France or Spain enable possibilities for investing in renewables that are attractive to consumers. They should therefore be a central topic of the current sustainability communication.

However windows of opportunity can also be influenced and created – in combination with the parallel incorporation of further actors. In this context, “pro-articulations” by organised consumer associations constitute interesting and practically unexplored multi-actor approaches (Neuner 2000). Whilst contra-articulations such as active, public boycotting or passive turn away from specific products or services send protest signals against service deteriorations on the part of the suppliers, pro-articulations are based on the principle of cooperation between supplier and the “demander” (i.e. customer). The goal is to initiate or positively rewarding particular supplier behaviour by sending positive signals. This can be directed at existing products and services which have a marginal market share (buying) or at prototypes that are not yet well-established (prototyping). If the consolidation of positive signals is achieved and the signal intensity thereby reaches

a critical mass, existing markets can be sustainably influenced and existing barriers to market entry can be removed. Sustainability innovations can be accelerated in this way or even made possible in the first place, as was the case, for example, with the introduction of the CFC-free refrigerator. In this way, these cooperation-based strategies provide extremely interesting possibilities for the “opening” of latent windows of opportunity.

#### 4.9 Leading by good example (instead of advising others)

Beside private consumption also public consumption matters to a considerable extent. As a result, the demand behaviour of public purchasers often has far greater consequences for sustainability than the daily choices of most household consumers (Mastny 2004, p. 133; Thøgersen 2005). In the EU public procurements amounted to approx. 14% of the Gross Domestic Product in 2001 (Mastny 2004, p. 122). The strong rise of organic food consumption in Denmark can at least partly traced back to the cumulative demand from public procurement in canteens and hospitals.

It would not simply be a symbolic act if actors of sustainability communication such as consumer ministries were to present themselves as supporters of “key points” of sustainable consumption, not only towards the private end-users, but also the other ministries as well as public administration (Belz and Reisch 2007, pp. 293-297).

## 5 Outcome

The tremendous challenge to make consumer patterns more sustainable can only be successful if the limited (financial and attention) resources for its support are used more effectively. Focusing on “key points” of sustainable consumption is a very promising approach in this respect. By positioning them at the centre of measures of sustainability communication, consideration is given to the demand for a focus on concrete products and behaviours (instead of working from an abstract vision of sustainable development) At the same time it contains (urgently needed) political and strategic components based on the goal of sustainable consumption in terms of generalisable consumption patterns. Consumption becomes a policy instrument that can make a valuable contribution to achieving a normative notion of intra- and inter-generational fairness with regard to the use of natural resources and sinks.

Which specific measures on the part of individual actors can and should be concretely taken would have to be decided in further detailed analyses. Moreover the concrete possibilities of individual measures (or sets of measures) would need to be further investigated with a view to possible actor alliances and current scopes for action. Our empirical study was able to make an initial contribution to this by naming “key points” and showing a path in which progress can be more rapidly made:

- Start with the most important.
- Think in terms of resources.
- Prioritise advices.
- Foster investments.
- Target the critical mass.
- Practise structural policy.
- Incorporate further actors.
- Create and use windows of opportunity.
- Be the good example.

What is decisive is that those who support sustainable consumption in terms of generalisable consumption patterns can realise these in the long term and see that their consumption has a tangible effect: on the overall use of resources, on other actors and on the relevant structures. Summarizing the message for future sustainable consumption communication we can say: Move from “peanuts” via “big points” to “key points”! (Figure 4).

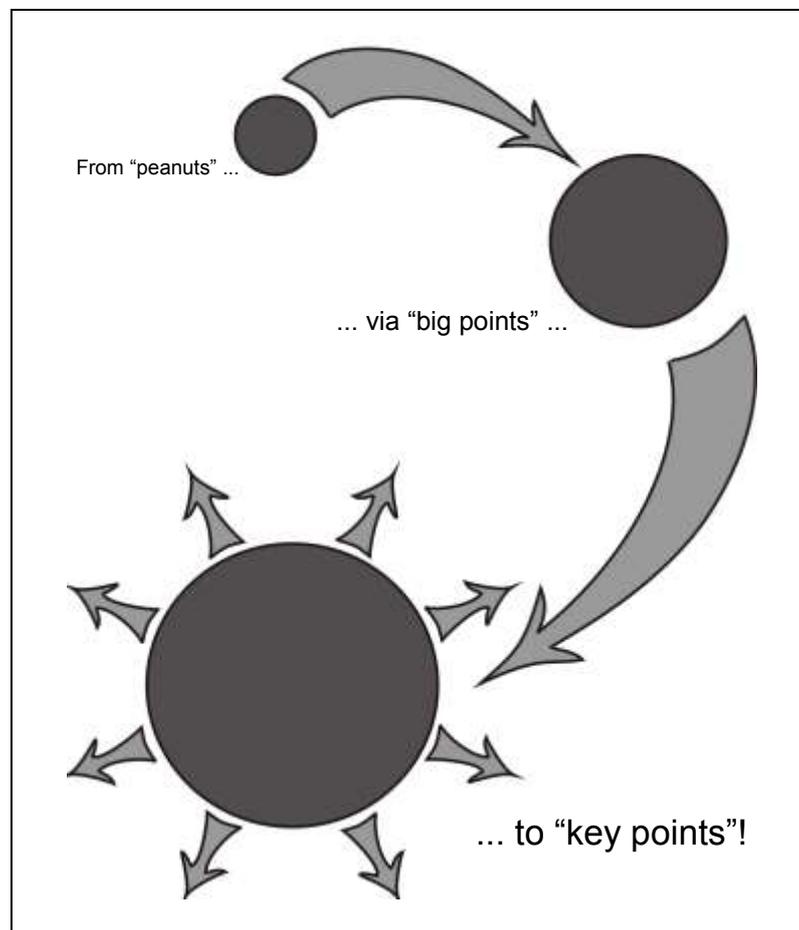


Figure 4: From “peanuts” via “big points” to “key points

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