

Defining a Role for Sustainable Consumption Initiatives In New Zealand

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Abstract

In Europe, environmental policymaking has evolved from an end-of-pipe focus in the 1970s, through cleaner production in the 1980s, to a product-oriented approach in the 1990s. However, in general the focus has been largely on sustainable production rather than on sustainable consumption; therefore the aggregated impacts of consumption and their implications for sustainable development have been largely overlooked in policymaking.

This situation is now changing worldwide with initiatives such as the United Nations 10-year Framework of Programs on Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) and the EU's commitment to producing a SCP Action Plan by 2007. It is therefore timely to consider the implications of the sustainable consumption agenda for New Zealand. This paper focuses on the role of product-oriented policy (such as Europe's Integrated Product Policy); influencing consumer behaviour (such as use of advertising and ecolabelling); and possible impacts on New Zealand's export-dominated economy.

1 Introduction

The idea of sustainable consumption originates in the green consumerism activities of the 1980s, and became established in the 1990s after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Chapter 4 of Agenda 21 from that conference focused on changing consumption patterns, noting that:

The major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in the industrialized countries. Consideration should be given to new concepts of wealth and prosperity which are more in harmony with the Earth's carrying capacity. Agenda 21, Chapter 4 (UN, 1992)

Sustainable consumption can be defined as:

The use of services and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life-cycle so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations.

UN CSD International Work Programme (UN/DESA, 1995)

The decoupling of economic growth from environmental degradation is a common theme in definitions of sustainable consumption (see, for example, DEFRA, 2003, p.11; WSSD, 2002,

p.7). And more recent definitions of sustainable consumption have included a focus on the choice and purchase of products or services, and on social aspects of sustainable consumption. However, the meaning of the term remains somewhat elusive in the same way as the meaning of “sustainable development” has remained elusive; indeed, this may be one reason for the popularity of such concepts (OECD, 2002, p.9).

However, two broad themes are generally addressed in the literature on sustainable consumption:

1. Changing consumers’ behaviour: examining why consumers behave in certain (un)sustainable ways, how this behaviour can change, and effective mechanisms for facilitating behavioural change. A particular focus of attention is how to influence consumers at the point of purchase of products and services.
2. Producing more sustainable products and services: encompassing concepts such as Life Cycle Management, Cleaner Production, Eco-innovation, Eco-efficiency, and Design for Environment/ Eco-Design.

It could be argued that the latter theme is more properly described as “sustainable production”; indeed, the phrase “sustainable consumption and production” is often used instead of “sustainable consumption.” However, obviously both themes need to be addressed in order to move to sustainable patterns of consumption. Therefore, this paper addresses both themes.

Some analysts have argued that environmental policymaking has evolved from an end-of-pipe focus in the 1960s and 1970s, through cleaner production in the 1980s, to a product-oriented approach in the 1990s. However, the emergence of sustainable consumption should characterize evolution of environmental policymaking in the early 21st century (Simons et al., 2001; Tukker, 2006). It is therefore timely to consider the implications of sustainable consumption for policymaking in New Zealand.

This paper reviews international activities on sustainable consumption (Section 2), and outlines initiatives proposed in these activities to address sustainable consumption (Section 3). Developments in the UK are also included as an example of a country that has been active in taking forward a sustainable consumption policy agenda over the last few years (see, for example, DEFRA, 2003; HM Government, 2005, p.42-70; Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, 2006). Then current initiatives in New Zealand are outlined and recommendations are made about development of a sustainable consumption policy agenda for New Zealand (Section 4). This will address the requirements of the Marrakesh Process under the Plan of Implementation developed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 (Section 5)

2 Global Developments

2.1 International Initiatives

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002, world leaders agreed to a Plan of Implementation which states that they will (Article 15, WSSD, 2002):

Encourage and promote the development of a 10-year framework of programmes in support of regional and national initiatives to accelerate the shift towards sustainable consumption and production to promote

social and economic development within the carrying capacity of ecosystems by addressing and, where appropriate, delinking economic growth and environmental degradation through improving efficiency and sustainability in the use of resources and production processes and reducing resource degradation, pollution and waste.

The Plan states that these programmes should aim to (Article 15, WSSD, 2002):

- Identify activities, tools, policies, measures, and monitoring and assessment mechanisms for measuring progress
- Promote sustainable patterns of production and consumption
- Develop production and consumption policies to improve the products and services provided
- Develop awareness-raising programmes
- Develop and adopt consumer information tools, and
- Increase eco-efficiency for capacity-building, technology transfer and exchange of technology with developing countries/countries with economies in transition.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) Division for Sustainable Development are the leading agencies with responsibility for promoting and developing the 10 Year Framework of Programmes. This is being done through the “Marrakesh Process” which was launched in June 2003. The Marrakesh Process is being taken forward through:

- Expert Meetings; the first was in Marrakesh in June 2003, the second in Costa Rica in September 2005, and the third will be held in Stockholm in June 2007 (UN, 2006a).
- Regional meetings: the regions in the Process are Africa, Asia and Pacific, Europe, and Latin America/Caribbean (UN, 2006b). Each region has held three or four meetings to date.
- Task Forces: at June 2006 there were seven confirmed task forces although others were due to be launched in the near future. The seven are: sustainable lifestyles (Sweden), sustainable product policies (UK), cooperation with Africa (on leapfrogging to SCP) (Germany), sustainable procurement (Switzerland), sustainable tourism (France), sustainable building and construction (Finland), and education for sustainable consumption (Italy) (UN, 2006c).

UNEP has had a Sustainable Consumption Programme since 1998 in its Sustainable Consumption and Production Branch. The topics it promotes include development and application of Life Cycle Assessment and Management (through the Life Cycle Initiative), sustainable procurement, sustainability communications, product service systems (PSS) and design for sustainability (D4S) (UNEP, 2006).

The Environment Directorate of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has work programmes on household consumption, greener public purchasing, corporate behaviour, and technological innovation (OECD, 2007). In 2005 it launched a new activity on household consumption patterns and household responses to environmental policies (“Household Behaviour and Environmental Policy”). It is focusing on the following key areas: household waste generation and recycling, personal transport choices, organic food consumption, and residential energy use.

2.2 *European Union*

The main challenge is to gradually change our current unsustainable consumption and production patterns and the non-integrated approach to policy-making. (Council of the European Union, 2006, p.2)

The European Union lists “Sustainable consumption and production” as one of seven key challenges in its renewed Sustainable Development Strategy (Council of the European Union, 2006, p.12). It plans to produce an EU Sustainable Consumption and Production Action Plan in 2007.

2.3 *United Kingdom*

In September 2003, the UK government published a report titled “Changing Patterns: UK Government Framework for Sustainable Consumption and Production” (DEFRA, 2003) As the DEFRA website points out (DEFRA, 2006a), this report was the first major statement from a government on sustainable consumption and production (SCP) since the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

This was followed by the establishment of the Sustainable Consumption Roundtable (SCR), jointly hosted by the National Consumer Council and the Sustainable Development Commission from September 2004 to March 2006. It organised a number of events and produced publications, including a final report titled “I Will If You Will. Towards Sustainable Consumption” (SCR, 2006).

The updated UK Sustainable Development Strategy (“Securing the Future”) published in March 2005 (HM Government, 2005) listed four priorities: sustainable consumption and production, climate change, natural resource protection, and sustainable communities. The section on SCP lists the following strategic directions (HM Government, 2005, p.7):

- Improve the environmental performance of products and services
- Improve resource efficiency and reduce waste and harmful emissions
- Influence consumption patterns, including proposals for new advice for consumers
- New commitments on sustainable procurement in the public sector
- Support for innovation for new products, materials and services
- Stronger partnerships with key business sectors
- Review of waste strategy with increased emphasis on reducing waste at source and making use of it as a resource.

In order to facilitate the SCP programme, an SCP Evidence Base Research Programme is being developed by DEFRA. This is guided by an Advisory Group on Sustainable Consumption and Production Evidence which was set up in September 2005. The Advisory Group has identified the following priority themes (DEFRA, 2006a):

- The scale of the challenge
- Sustainable consumption (by individuals and businesses)
- Business environmental performance and competitiveness
- The impacts of food production and consumption
- Products and product policy

- Sustainable procurement.

Reports have been produced that address each of these themes and are available on the DEFRA website (DEFRA, 2006b).

3 Initiatives To Address Sustainable Consumption

A wide range of initiatives are proposed in the literature on sustainable consumption. This section provides a listing of these initiatives in the international documents on sustainable consumption produced by the European Union (Council of the European Union, 2006), World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD, 2002), OECD (2002), and by the UK government (HM Government, 2005). Note that the following list excludes initiatives focused on specific topics such as waste, energy and transport, and is divided according to the two sustainable consumption themes identified in Section 1.

Theme 1: producing more sustainable products and services

- Development of new environmental technologies and eco-innovation.
- Development of cleaner production processes and eco-efficient products and services.
- Promotion of environmental technologies and eco-innovations (including collection and dissemination of information) to encourage uptake by businesses (and particularly in developing countries).
- Voluntary initiatives by businesses such as Environmental Management Systems, codes of conduct, certification and public reporting on environmental and social issues.
- Setting standards and targets for products and processes.
- Dialogue, partnership and cooperative programmes between individual enterprises, key business sectors, communities and government.
- Training and education (particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises).
- Use of economic incentives such as full-cost pricing, environmental taxes and charges, green tax reform, and removal of environmentally harmful subsidies.

Theme 2: changing consumer behaviour

- Sustainable public procurement
- Product labelling schemes
- Advertising and marketing
- Awareness-raising campaigns
- Provision of information and education more generally
- Banning certain products
- Use of economic incentives such as full-cost pricing, environmental taxes and charges, green tax reform, and removal of environmentally harmful subsidies.

4 Initiatives To Address Sustainable Consumption In New Zealand

Given the international activity in the area of sustainable consumption (as reviewed in Section 2), and the increasing attention that will be given to this topic in the next few years, it is relevant to ask whether New Zealand should be coordinating – at a national level – development of a strategic approach to address the challenges posed by sustainable consumption. This could link together disparate policies that already exist, and contribute to the Sustainable Development

Programme of Action's intention of "decoupling economic growth from pressures on the environment" (DPMC, 2003, p.10). It would also give a better context for the work of organisations such as the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Business Network, and local authorities undertaking sustainability initiatives.

This section discusses two aspects of the sustainable consumption agenda that are particularly relevant from this perspective: product-oriented policy, and marketing and behavioural change.

4.1 Product-Oriented Policy

It is becoming more and more evident that consumers are increasingly interested in the "world that lies behind" the product they buy. Apart from price and quality, they want to know how and where and by whom the product has been produced. This increasing awareness about environmental and social issues is a sign of hope. Governments and industry must build on that. (Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director, 23 August 1999, UNEP News Release NR99-90.)

Throughout the 1990s the emergence of product-oriented policies has been a feature of environmental policymaking in a number of countries. In Europe, examples include the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Directive, End of Life Vehicles Directive, and Eco-Design of Energy Using Products (EuP) Directive. However, perhaps more significantly, an Integrated Product Policy (IPP) initiative has been under development since 1998 (Europa, 2007).

A key feature of product-oriented policy (and Product-Oriented Environmental Management Systems (POEMS) more generally) is the use of a life cycle perspective. In other words, the upstream and downstream environmental impacts of products are considered in development of policy. These upstream and downstream environmental impacts are considered relevant regardless of the country where they occur.

New Zealand has an export-driven economy and therefore the implications of this life cycle perspective are clear. In the future, more attention will be focused on the environmental impacts of producing goods in New Zealand and exporting them to overseas markets. If New Zealand producers and exporters cannot demonstrate their environmental credentials, they are in a vulnerable position. The recent Food Miles debate is an example of the consequences of applying a life cycle perspective in environmental policymaking.

A number of national-level environmental policy initiatives have taken a product-oriented approach, including:

- New Zealand Waste Strategy: "The New Zealand Waste Strategy: Towards Zero Waste and a Sustainable New Zealand" (MfE, 2002) was published in 2002. It notes that former waste policies have tended to focus on end-of-pipe solutions; however, this strategy "recognises the need to promote materials and resource efficiency at every stage of production and consumption" (MfE, 2002, p.12). It specifies six principles to guide central and local government in implementing the strategy (MfE, 2002, p.19-20): global citizenship, kaitiakitanga/stewardship, extended producer responsibility, full-cost pricing, the life-cycle principle, and the precautionary principle. Part 6 of the current "Waste

Minimisation (Solids)” Bill is on “Extended Producer Responsibility” and provides for setting up product stewardship programmes for certain products (NZ Parliament, 2006).

- Packaging Accord: the updated Packaging Accord was agreed in 2004, and subsequently a Code of Practice was produced (PAC.NZ, no date) to guide members of the Accord on implementation. The wording of the Accord makes it clear that it is taking a life cycle approach, focusing on (re)design of packaging, education of stakeholders in the packaging life cycle, and sustainable procurement in addition to waste management.

In addition, the Ministry for the Environment has coordinated some work on product stewardship. It published a discussion document on Product Stewardship and Water Efficiency Labelling in July 2005 which states that (MfE, 2005, p.vii):

Product stewardship involves producers, importers, brand owners, retailers and other parties involved in the life cycle of products accepting responsibility for the environmental impacts of the products throughout their life cycle.

The MfE website also lists 13 industry-operated product stewardship schemes covering products varying from paint to packaging to tyres to used oil (MfE, 2006c). However, the majority of this work is focused on waste management (albeit from a life cycle perspective) as opposed to considering all stages in the life cycle of products.

Therefore it seems that there is an opportunity to develop strategic life-cycle oriented environmental management policy and related activities that:

1. Identify export sectors most at risk from a product-oriented focus in environmental policymaking
2. Works with these sectors to implement environmental improvements based on a life cycle perspective.
3. Demonstrates the environmental credentials of these sectors to export markets.

4.2 Marketing and Behavioural Change

Our headline assessment is that a critical mass of citizens and businesses is ready and waiting to act on the challenge of sustainable consumption. But to act, they need the confidence that they will not be acting alone, against the grain and to no purpose ... It is government, at all levels, that is best placed to co-ordinate a collective approach to change, through an enabling policy framework. (SCR, 2006, p.5)

New Zealand’s “clean and green” image is often cited as positively contributing to promotion of New Zealand’s products in overseas markets, and attracting tourists to New Zealand. However, economic activities in New Zealand have a number of significant environmental impacts. These environmental impacts arise from the New Zealand population’s consumption of goods and services, and production of goods for export to overseas markets. If New Zealand is to retain its “clean and green” image, it must therefore address these patterns of consumption and their environmental and wider sustainability implications, alongside the impacts of producing goods for export markets (discussed in Section 4.1).

A number of initiatives have addressed behavioural change and its environmental implications in New Zealand, including:

- The Sustainable Living Programme: a coordinated set of community education programmes that aims to influence consumer behaviour (see review by Taylor and Allen, 2007).
- Ecolabelling programmes: Choice New Zealand Programme is an ecolabelling programme run by the New Zealand Ecolabelling Trust. It aims to identify – for consumers – products/services within a product/service category that are environmentally preferable from a life cycle perspective. Specifications have been published for 28 categories that specify criteria to be met by products/services if they are to be awarded a label (ECNZ, 2006). In addition, Water Efficiency Labelling Standards (WELS) are due to come into effect in New Zealand on 1 July 2007, and are likely to initially apply to cover taps, dishwashers, washing machines, showerheads, toilets, urinals and flow controllers (voluntary); they give information about a product's water consumption and efficiency, and the intention is that they will stimulate design of more water efficient products in future (MfE, 2006b).
- Advertising and campaigns: examples include the Big Clean Up and 0800-Smokey campaigns by Auckland Regional Council, Target 10% (a national campaign to reduce electricity consumption), and Keeping New Zealand New by Meridian Energy (see review by Newton and Frame, 2007).

However, in general attempts to influence individual consumers through awareness-raising, education, ecolabelling and so on, have had limited success (e.g. Rex and Baumann, 2007; Jackson, 2005). It has been argued that policymakers need to engage with a more in-depth analysis of the links between personal values, social norms and cultural narratives, and peoples' behaviours and practices (RESOLVE, no date, commenting on the transition to a sustainable energy economy in the UK).

This suggests an opportunity to develop an integrated strategic programme of research and actions that builds on existing work about aspects such as lifestyle theory, the sociology and social psychology of consumer behaviour, and value change in modern society (see, for example, the review of evidence on consumer behaviour and behavioural change in relation to sustainable consumption by Jackson, 2005).

5 Conclusions

The World Summit on Sustainable Development calls for the development of regional and national programmes of action to accelerate the shift to sustainable consumption and production (WSSD, 2002, p.7). It suggests that all countries should take action, with developed countries taking a lead. The intention is to agree an international framework of programmes at the 19th session of the Commission on Sustainable Development to be held in 2011 (UN, 2006d).

New Zealand has a number of policies and activities that fall within the remit of sustainable consumption. However, an opportunity exists for development of a New Zealand-wide sustainable consumption programme that will meet the requirements of the WSSD Plan of Implementation. Such a programme also has the potential to benefit New Zealand's economy by addressing the challenges posed by development of product-oriented environmental policy in

export markets, and maintaining and strengthening the “clean and green” New Zealand image (as described in Section 4).

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