Preface

This book seeks to create a shared language. It aims to spearhead a conversation about the future of consumer society in a world threatened by interlinked ecological and social tensions. Its premise is that we need to transition away from mass consumption as the organizing principle of societal life, to a society in which the well-being and dignity of people are achieved with a much smaller impact on life-supporting earth systems. This book is especially aimed at researchers, teachers, policymakers, activists, businesspeople, professional communicators, and, crucially, members of the general public who recognize that the current trajectory for addressing the ecological crises is inadequate. This trajectory is largely based on technological solutions and economic quick-fixes to what is essentially a social problem.

Since the United Nations (UN) Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, consumption has been recognized as an essential dimension of sustainable development. However, the concepts of sustainable consumption and lifestyles have remained poorly understood and articulated, and thus underdeveloped for policy or consistent practical interventions. Since 1992, the few scholars working on sustainable consumption did so in isolation from each other and often from others, even within their own disciplinary silos. They tended to be inexperienced in policy processes and had weak links with grassroots advocacy and activism.

In 2008, a group of scholars in the USA created a forum for interconnecting these researchers and bridging their work with practitioners. It became the Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (SCORAI) – following a European Union-funded (EU) project a few years earlier under the name SCORE!. The premise was that addressing the ecological problem by increasing energy efficiency and replacing fossil- with non-fossil energy sources addressed the supply side but ignored the demand side of the energy balance sheet; and that this approach was woefully inadequate for reducing impacts associated with energy use. A better understanding was needed of why affluent societies consume so much and how that system of consumption functions.

Today, with approximately 1,500 members and activities across all continents and many countries, SCORAI is one of several nodes of research, policy analysis, and practice in the field of sustainable consumption and lifestyles. The Hot or Cool Institute, SCORAI's partner in creating this book, is prominent among them. The work of Hot or Cool Institute is predicated on the understanding that the magnitude, urgency, and scale of the ecological challenge require a rethink of our systems and how we organize ourselves as a society to meet our needs.

The interdisciplinary understanding of how this complex system that we call consumer society functions and reproduces itself has made huge progress. Various branches of the United Nations and European governments, including the EU, have adopted official proclamations about the need to reduce consumption. Among the most recent examples, in 2024 the UN Environment Assembly adopted a dedicated resolution on "promoting sustainable lifestyles." Even the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which since its inception in 1988 has primarily focused on assessments of impacts and interventions, devoted an entire chapter of its Sixth Assessment Report in 2022 to consumption. It concluded that there is the untapped potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40-70% by 2050 through changes in consumption and lifestyles. Consumption also appears in the media with growing frequency.

But policies and actions greatly lag behind this growing awareness, knowledge, and understanding. To some extent, this is not surprising, as social change is often slow. Internal tensions also interfere with progress: between the interests and capabilities of the Global North and Global South; between science and politics; between the familiarity of established culture and the uncertainty of rapid change; between the huge cost of immediate action and an even greater future costs of inaction; between the need for a steady-state economy and concern for the wellbeing of people; between individual behavioral change and system change; between eroded social trust and cohesion in highly unequal societies and the need for collective action. In addition, sustainable consumption, unlike other urgent environmental problems and potential solutions, does not have a clear political champion.

This book has two objectives. One is to curate a common language – a shared vocabulary of concepts – that will enable people from very diverse walks of life to understand and talk about the roots of the current ecological crisis and potential solutions. By assembling and cross-connecting the elements of that language in one place, we seek to create a conversation about consumption and lifestyles. In the digital age, anyone can find some kind of explanation online for each of the concepts included in this book. But we seek to impart a specific meaning to these concepts, to interpret them, their history, different perspectives, and applications in the context of consumption and social change. This vocabulary will hopefully result in a more robust and productive discourse and new insights on how to transition to a post-consumer society.

The second objective is to strengthen the multi-disciplinary community or network of researchers, practitioners, and activists, and to create a common understanding of what we mean by "sustainable consumption and lifestyles." As we will see from the various contributions, the understandings, framings, focal points, problem definitions, and even

language are quite different from each other, although there are obvious overlaps and similarities that we have tried to highlight. A common language is vital for shared and cohesive social change. We hope that ultimately this book will open new doors for action and mobilize the changemakers, be they academics, activists, citizens, or policy makers.

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Introduction

1. Consumption officially enters the sustainability debate

As world leaders prepared to gather in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 on the eve of the United Nations (UN) Conference on Environment and Development (also known as the 'Earth Summit'), the complexities of unsustainable development were just beginning to dawn on them in uncomfortable ways. Until then, in the “Global North”, the widely held view was that population growth and poverty were the main unaddressed drivers of environmental harm. Following this framing, negotiations at the Summit would need to focus on the “Global South”, given its high rates of fertility and poverty.

But scientific research was beginning to tell a richer, unacknowledged story: in the Global South, negative impacts of activities such as cutting down forests, digging out minerals, and growing bananas and coffee in unsustainable ways, arose primarily from activities undertaken to satisfy the ever-growing appetites of a minority global population in the Global North. In a globalized economy, *overproduction* in the Global South was the flip side of *overconsumption* in the Global North.

This reframing of the problem would threaten to derail negotiations at the Summit – it would position countries from the Global North versus those from the Global South, Big Agriculture versus small farmers, foreign aid versus fair compensation for labor and resources, and accusations of neo-colonialism versus corrupt local governance. It would also be a major shift in how environmental protection would be perceived by industrial countries; since the 1960s, these countries had invested primarily in controlling pollution generated within their own borders.

In the end, the wording of the final resolution was a balancing act. It stated: "*inappropriate development resulting in overconsumption, coupled with an expanding world population" are the cause of environmental degradation* (UN 1992; para 6.1). An entire chapter of the action document was dedicated to “changing consumption patterns”: calling on relevant parties to "develop a better understanding of the role of consumption” and to develop “policies and strategies to encourage changes in unsustainable consumption patterns."

The resulting *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* (UN 1992; para 4.5), better known as Agenda 21, declares:

"*Although consumption patterns are very high in certain parts of the world, the basic consumer needs of a large section of humanity are not being met. This results in excessive demands and unsustainable lifestyles among the richer segments, which place immense stress on the environment. The poorer segments, meanwhile, are unable to meet food,*

health care, shelter and educational needs. Changing consumption patterns will require a multipronged strategy focusing on demand, meeting the basic needs of the poor, and reducing wastage and the use of finite resources in the production process."

This quote provides an understanding that would shape research, policy and actions on sustainable consumption and lifestyles to this day. Versions of the declaration have percolated through every UN sustainability summit since Agenda 21 (see Figure 1), albeit in watered-down interpretations, including the current framework for the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

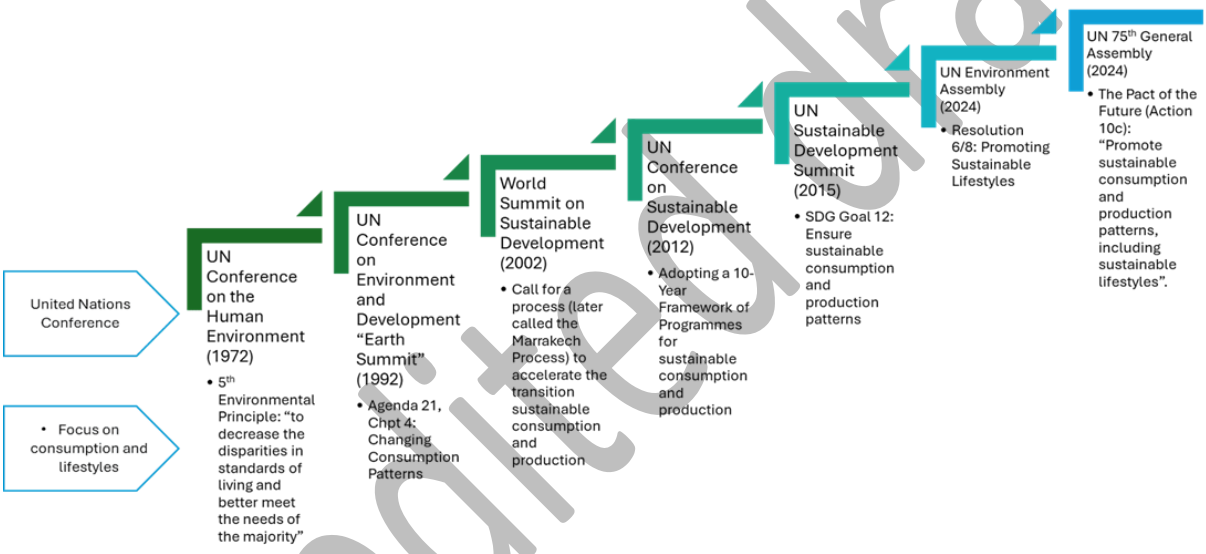

Figure 0.1: United Nations sustainability conferences, their outcome documents and their focus on consumption and lifestyles from 1972-2024

Global efforts to address unsustainable development from this consumption-population perspective – by world leaders at the UN negotiations, research scientists, businesses, civil society organizations, and activists – resulted in near-constant tensions and little apparent success. This demonstrates the complexity unveiled by the new problem acknowledgment at the Earth Summit. The continuing rise in global temperatures, biodiversity loss, increasing number of natural disasters, and rising eco-social tensions, all demonstrate the failure to bring these efforts together effectively. It further suggests the urgent need to revisit what and why we consume, how we produce, distribute, and discard the things we do consume, and how our complex production-consumption system is linked to social and ecological tipping points.

This introductory chapter begins by sketching out the origins of consumer society (Section 2), the history and meaning of the term "sustainable consumption" in the global sustainability discourse (Section 3), and the evolution of the understanding of how the modern societal system of consumption functions (Section 4). Section 5 discusses some of the major challenges standing in the way of a transition to a different organizing principle of societal life, and Section 6 makes the case for creating a vocabulary in which these issues can be widely discussed. The 87 entries in this book represent a non-exhaustive list of established and emerging concepts at the core of language being used in these discussions. Like all languages, this one will evolve over time through use; hopefully, it will result in mobilizing powerful actors to set priorities and affect social change.

2. Engineering a consumer society: from the USA to the world

More than half a century before the 1992 Earth Summit, the British economist John Maynard Keynes published his well-known essay *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*. After observing in his lifetime the huge increase in workers' productivity in the manufacturing and energy sectors – owing to technological and process innovations, and the harnessing of fossil energy – Keynes predicted that a hundred years from then people will be able to drastically reduce their working hours to about 15 hours per week in order to satisfy their needs. The "economic problem" would be solved. A new challenge would be *"for the ordinary person, with no special talents, to occupy himself, especially if he no longer has roots in the soil or in custom or in the beloved conventions of a traditional society."*

Keynes' predictions have not come to pass. In Europe and North America, working hours have indeed decreased since then, though not nearly in step with continuing productivity growth, as Keynes anticipated. Where he was most mistaken, perhaps, was the assumption that the motivation for people to work is mostly to satisfy their basic needs. He did not consider that, once the "economic problem" of basic subsistence was solved, cultivated and seemingly insatiable wants would take their place as the motivator for work and the pursuit of well-being.

In Keynes' days, it was impossible to foresee that a complex societal system would be developed to perpetuate the human drive to satisfy wants through the acquisition and maintenance of goods and services. Nor could it be envisioned that this behavior would become the organizing principle of societal life, including culture, institutions, politics, and the economy. Today, we call this complex system the ***consumer society***.

In her magisterial work *A Consumer Republic* (2004), historian Lisabeth Cohen describes how, during the three decades after the end of World War II (WWII), consumer society was

constructed in the United States. It is instructive to retell this story because the US model soon became a prototype to be exported and replicated throughout the world, overriding alternative models of development (see Box 1).

Box 1. Construction of Consumer Society in the United States

After the deprivations of the Great Depression and the sacrifices of WWII, the USA in 1945 was ready for a victorious shopping spree. The government – fearful that the return of war veterans would lead to widespread unemployment – looked to industry to shift its wartime production capacity toward the civilian sector. The Employment Act of 1946 stated that "*federal government's responsibility…[is to]…promote maximum employment, production, and purchasing power"*. Industry happily complied by deploying aggressive and sophisticated modern marketing and **advertising** methods to increase demand for their products. The labor unions too were willing partners in the effort. As early as 1944, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) wrote "*Without adequate purchasing power in the form of wages we cannot get full employment."*

The 1944 "GI Bill" helped returning WWII veterans to get free college education, as well as down payments and government-guaranteed loans for purchasing homes and other goods (Black Americans were excluded). The mortgage interest deductions, government-financed infrastructure, and local zoning laws facilitated the growth of sprawling suburbs, with their endless procession of appliances and furnishings, and high dependence on car-based **mobility**. The private suburban shopping mall became a public space – stratified by race and income – replacing the previously more egalitarian public spaces of city streets, cafes, and places of commerce. The proliferation of credit cards allowed people to buy now and pay later. The earlier creation of Social Security in 1935 facilitated the transition to mass consumption by relieving Americans from the need to save for old age.

The results were astonishing. National output of goods and services doubled between 1946 and 1956 and doubled again by 1970, driven by private consumption expenditures. From then on, economic growth became a measure of general prosperity driven by consumption. By 1960, 62% of Americans owned their homes, compared to 44% in 1940.

At the peak of the Cold War, American lifestyles also served as an important symbol of the superiority of the capitalist system over Soviet-style socialism. In the famous "kitchen" debate between Vice President Nixon and Soviet Premier Khrushchev at the American Exhibition in Moscow in 1959, Nixon boasted: "The United States [has] come closest to the ideal of prosperity for all in a classless society".

In short, a major cultural and economic transition took place in the USA in the span of a single generation. The transition not only changed the lifestyles of most Americans in profound ways but also fostered a cultural shift: mass consumption and the suburban lifestyle became almost a national civic religion, conflated with such fundamental human aspirations as **wellbeing** and democracy.

Source: Adapted from Cohen (2004)

By the 1970s, twenty years before the Earth Summit recognized consumerism as a global ecological problem, all key pillars of the growth-oriented consumer society were firmly in place: the debt-financed economy – both household and government – that demanded growth to survive; pension funds dependent on growth to deliver on their commitments; the **financial system** happy to fuel growth, both real and imagined; and the ever-rising aspirations of **households**. By the 1970s, consumers as a distinct class, transcending the traditional sociological groupings by age, race, wealth, education, or political leanings, became a political force to reckon with. Through **boycotts, buycotts,** and other public campaigns, consumer movements punished and rewarded companies for their social and ecological impacts. Consumer protection laws were adopted to protect that distinct class.

The neoliberal ideology – which proclaimed that greed and wealth accumulation are good, markets know best, and government is a drag on the economy – came to the fore in the late 1970s and extended its influence to the present day. Its policies emphasize free trade, deregulation, lower taxes, increasing consumption to grow the economy, and promoting the ideology of consumer sovereignty. It intentionally conflates a consumer with a **citizen**, and creates a transactional relationship between citizens and the government: the purpose of public policy would increasingly not be *to serve the public good* but rather to satisfy the consumer-voter.

In the next logical stage of maturation, by the mid-to-late twentieth century, many elements of neoliberalism and the US-style consumer society spread to other parts of the world, first in the industrial economies of North America and Western Europe, then in Asia and post-socialist Europe, and finally in capitals and major cities of the rest of the world.

3. Defining sustainable consumption, sustainable lifestyles – and sustainable living

Despite its growing use in research and policy circles, the operational meaning of the term sustainable consumption is quite fluid. Some may associate it with daily household

decisions such as minimal shopping, leisure flying, and taking cruises, and with green and ethical shopping. For social activists, sustainable consumption may bring to mind changing personal and community **value system**s, **norms**, **social practices,** personal priorities, diet, or adopting a minimalist way of life. From a policy perspective, sustainable consumption may signify a **personal carbon budget**, shorter workweek, limits on advertising, more efficient buildings and mobility infrastructure; while the **political economy** perspective points toward a diminished role of the financial sector, **degrowth**, a **steady-state economy**, taxation reform and reigning in corporate power. Each perspective has its own language and shared understandings among its adherents, but communication between them is inadequate.

Most definitions of sustainable consumption and lifestyles are modifications of the now-classic definition of sustainable development offered by the World Commission on Environment and Development (known as the Brundtland Report, titled *Our Common Future*): "*sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*" (WCED 1987). Although the root concepts "lifestyle" and "consumption" have been previously defined by academics, the modifier "sustainable" brings additional complexity to the definitions.

Sustainable consumption is both a concept and a practice, and research on it sets out to understand and promote the types of consumption behaviors that are conducive to a sustainable society. This is reflected in one of its earliest and most widely used definitions (known as the "Oslo declaration"):

Sustainable consumption is "*the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations*" (Norwegian Ministry of Environment 1994).

The concept of sustainable lifestyles goes beyond consumption, however. It speaks to more complex and intangible aspects of human life, including habits, social practices, traditions, aspirations, and the search for meaning, all embedded in societal structures: physical, economic, cultural, and political. A 2016 definition captures this complexity:

"A sustainable lifestyle minimizes ecological impacts while enabling a flourishing life for individuals, households, communities, and beyond" (Vergragt et al. 2016).

In policy and academic discourse, the two terms – sustainable consumption and sustainable lifestyles – are often used interchangeably, and confusingly so (Gabriel and Lang, 2006; Miles, 1998). One helps to define the other and vice versa: sustainable

consumption research emphasizes the material aspect of sustainable lifestyles, and conversely, lifestyles determine one's consumption patterns. While sustainable consumption tends to address decisions and actions linked to the purchase, use, and disposal of material products and services, the term sustainable lifestyle incorporates other actions in the context of values, education, community, and infrastructure.

One term that easily connects sustainable consumption and sustainable lifestyles is "sustainable living." While encompassing both terms, it does so without taking on the notion of "lifestyle" as advertised by corporate marketing.

"Sustainable living is equitable consumption and lifestyles that contribute to wellbeing of individuals and society within ecological limits" (Akenji 2019)

This definition has at its core three key elements: ecological limits as a basis and boundary for providing individual and societal needs; equity and justice in how we organize ourselves as a society and pursue our needs; and wellbeing as a shared objective. It also recognizes that consumption and lifestyles are embedded in a societal context, including institutions, norms, and infrastructures that frame and shape individual and collective choices. Implicit in the definition is the recognition that there is more than one way of living sustainably; there are different approaches by different individuals and societies that could be described as sustainable.

The concept of sustainable living also accommodates a broader set of relevant concepts, such as **voluntary simplicity**, minimalism, **sufficiency,** and healthy living – often combining physical, emotional, and spiritual health with a more limited role for materialism. In public health parlance, sustainable living promotes health and well-being for individuals, communities, and the planet by balancing ecological, economic, and social systems; in business, it would be reflected in **work-life balance** and employment conditions; and in marketing, promotion of "green" or healthy products and services.

Because of their overlaps and variations, the above three terms and definitions are used across different entries in this book. The emergence of these concepts can be seen in the evolving understanding of consumer society elaborated in the following section.

4. Evolving understanding of consumer society as a complex system

Over the millennia, scholars, religious leaders, and social commentators have expressed criticism of unrestrained wealth accumulation, consumption, and their underpinnings – greed, gluttony, acquisitiveness, profit-seeking, excessive luxury, and positional consumption. In the twentieth century, writers such as Veblen (The *Theory of The Leisure*

Class, 1899), Galbraith (*The Affluent Society*, 1958), Marcuse (*One-Dimensional Man,* 1960), Elgin (*Voluntary Simplicity*, 1981), and others focused largely on the moral, class, and existential dimensions of mass consumption and its impact on the quality of modern life.

That changed in 1992 when at the Earth Summit **consumerism** was officially declared a *global ecological problem*. Since then, sustainable consumption and consumerism have attracted increasing attention from scientists, community activists, and policymakers. Much of the early research on the topic of consumption focused on consumer behavior. After all, the consumer is the most visible end-user of market products and is often assumed to have free will and rational expression of choice. Economic, social, and psychological theories have been used to explain the role of consumers as economic actors and to theorize about their motivations and drivers (Ajzen 1991; Bourdieu 1984; Thaler 1980, 2016).

But people do not go about as rational, fully informed, and fully autonomous actors in the formal economy, as often attributed to them in theories. And while their pursuit of meaning and well-being must include the acquisition of goods and services, people do not solely seek these things through material means. *"People also love, generate ideas, express their value systems, take care of family, create art, cherish silence, pray, fast, in ways that material flows and market economics cannot account for"* (Akenji 2019). They are also influenced by traditions and **social norms**, constrained by physical and regulatory infrastructure, and manipulated by sophisticated **advertising**. Part of the challenge of research for sustainable consumption and lifestyles is that this mixture of material and psychological, rational and emotional, biological and cultural, all come together in vastly differing configurations across billions of people.

Steven Miles (1998) has noted that: *"How we consume, why we consume, and the parameters laid down for us within which we consume have become increasingly significant influences on how we construct our everyday lives"*. The statement recognizes that lifestyles occur within, or are railroaded by, broader social and physical contexts; in approaching sustainable living, it is important to differentiate between factors at the individual or the household level, and those that are beyond (direct) individual control (Wallnoefer et al. 2024). Scholars thus began to argue that focusing on the individual consumer is problematic because it fails to recognize the historical, political, and social conditions that shape everyday life, including our consumption patterns. The frame thus expanded from consuming individuals to a *system* of consumption.

Books such as Schor's *The Overworked American* (1993) and *The Overspent American* (1998), De Graaf's *Affluenza* (2001), Maniates' and Princen's *Confronting Consumption* (2002), and works of several other authors featured in Jackson's *Earthscan Reader on Sustainable Consumption* (2006) recognized that consumption is a manifestation of both

basic human psychology and intentionally designed societal systems, including the ways employment and economy are organized. Their work was further extended by Shove et al. (2012) who used **social practice theory** to emphasize that consumption is a collective act transmitted through widely accepted social norms and practices.

The psychological perspective on consumption – widely used until then and accused by many of "blaming the victim" or **consumer scapegoatism** – gave way to institutional theories, cultural analyses, macroeconomics, and theories of social change and collective action.

Scholars have emphasized the deliberate construction of the system of consumption in the U.S. and linked it specifically to the **economic growth** paradigm and, importantly, to its ideological underpinnings created during the Cold War period (see Section 2). While the idea of a deliberate construction implies that, at least in principle, the system of consumption could be dismantled, the ideological dimension also highlights the difficulty of doing so. This was illustrated by US President Bush's famous declaration in 1992 that "*The American way of life is not up for negotiation. Period*."

Research on consumption also began to increasingly draw on more quantitative methodologies like natural resource accounting. Using methods such as Environmentally-Extended Multi-Regional Input-Output analysis enabled researchers to estimate the material and **carbon "footprint"** of a given consumption pattern and to show a clear correlation between the **level of income**, resource consumption, and environmental impacts. This focus on materials and energy, economic behaviors, and the desire for modeling and quantification partly explains why process and product optimization and technological innovations have become prevalent policy recommendations for climate mitigation (Akenji 2019).

The landmark report by Jackson (2010) *Prosperity Without Growth* delved deeper into the systemic nature of mass consumption. It specifically highlighted the links between mass consumption and economic growth, the associated role of the financial sector, and the impact of economic globalization, which made mass production cheaper and the useful life of products shorter. The report challenged the notion that absolute decoupling of economic growth from the use of energy through technological solutions is the best policy solution to pursue. Jackson followed in the footsteps of Herman Daly's (1993) theory of the **steady-state economy** and Peter Victor's (2008) macroeconomic models of such an economy in Canada.

From then on, questioning the powerful dominance of technological solutions to ecological crisis (also referred to as "techno-optimism," "weak sustainability approach," and "green

technology approach") and of absolute decoupling of economic growth from energy and material use – once the position of a tiny minority – would gain more currency among academics (Alfredsson et al. 2018; Parrique 2019). We clearly need both green technology and demand reduction through lifestyle changes (see Box 2). Nonetheless, in the very real world of politics and policymaking, the dominance of technology-based over lifestyle-based approaches to climate mitigation continues.

Box 2: Limitations of the Green Technology Approach

There are a number of key limitations to an approach that pins its hopes on green technology and efficiency improvements. These include:

- Efficiency is blind to the upper limits of emissions, and so we can keep improving it even as we transgress the planetary boundaries.
- Owing to the rebound effect, the sheer increase in the scale of consumption during the past several decades has canceled out the efficiency gains. No country in the world has succeeded in "absolute decoupling" of economic growth from environmental impacts. Not even (or, especially not) the Scandinavian countries that appear at the top of most indexes of progress – but with per capita footprints that would need multiple Earths.
- The technology-based approach focuses on the symptoms, not the causes of the unsustainability. At the fundamental level, we need to address overproduction in relation to overconsumption.
- The promises of the technology-based approach have failed to deliver over the last several decades (see carbon-sucking machines, geoengineering, and electric vehicles, for example). There is yet no plausible scenario for replacing our entire car stock or providing every family in the world with an efficient electric vehicle without great ecological damage.
- The technology-based approach widens the wealth gap because it is the rich who tend to own the patents or invest in these technologies.
- According to the International Energy Agency, global growth of energy demand in 2024 and 2025 is expected to be 4% annually relative to the preceding year. At this rate of increase, the supply of renewable energy does not keep up with the growth of demand, despite its own exponential growth rate (IEA 2024). This means that fossil-fuel-generated electricity makes up the difference.

- Increasing renewable energy generation brings about other ecological problems owing to the increased demand for minerals and rare earth metals as well as political instability in mining regions (see **Energy Overshoot**).

Source: adapted from *"The (Technology) Efficiency Paradox",* blog post by Lewis Akenji, available at *www.hotorcool.org*

The understanding of the attraction of consumer society and a potential transition beyond it has been greatly enriched by the so-called happiness and subjective wellbeing research (Smith and Reid, 2018). Numerous scholars, among them Layard (2005), Kahneman and Deaton (2010), Tsurumi (2020), Graham (2011), and Skidelsky and Skidelsky (2012), to name a few, interrogated such questions as: Does wealth accumulation and consumption make people happy? Is there a saturation point? How much is enough?

The answers are not straightforward. On the one hand, deprivation is a source of unhappiness in life; and friends, family, and a sense of belonging are the true long-lasting sources of life satisfaction. Research findings also suggested a point of saturation; beyond a moderate per capita income, additional income does not lead to greater happiness or satisfaction with life. On the other hand, satisfaction with material life is a relative concept. It is deeply grounded in social comparisons and how much one has *relative* to others (Kahneman and Deaton 2010; Killingsworth, Kahneman, and Mellers 2023).

That leads to a kind of arms race: while the top earners strive to distance themselves from the rest (including their peers) by accumulating and spending more, those in the lower economic classes strive to emulate them and distance themselves from those below them. The phenomenon applies to all economic strata and brings a lot of stress to people's lives and little happiness to most.

At the time of this writing, complexities in the system of mass consumption – its components and mutual interdependencies in the context of a global economy – are generally recognized, but points of intervention are less clear. While the case for transitioning toward a different organizing principle of societal life is strong, conversations about the point of departure and destination lack common ground. There are other major challenges to contend with. Three among those – the socio-economic impact of reducing consumption, the inequality between the Global North and Global South, and wealth inequality within countries – especially stand out.

5. Challenges to system transition

5.1 Economic and political implications of diminished consumption

In recent years, various branches of the United Nations, as well as European governments and the EU, have adopted official proclamations about the need to reduce consumption.

For example, the European Commission's New Energy Efficiency Directive (EU/2023/1791) established a weak, politically tainted but legally binding target to reduce the EU's final energy consumption by 11.7% by 2030, based on 2020 scenarios. In the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework, Goal 12 is on Responsible Consumption, Goal 10 is on Reducing Inequalities, and Goal 3 is on Wellbeing. The adoption of the UN 10-Year Framework of Programmes for Sustainable Consumption and Production (10YFP) in 2012 at the Rio+20 Summit so far stands out as the most ambitious approach to the issue by the UN system, but the mandate is poorly under-resourced and has no functional implementation mechanism. In 2024, the UN Environment Assembly adopted a resolution (6/8) titled "Promoting Sustainable Lifestyles". The same year, at the UN's 75th General Assembly, the 193-member organization adopted "The Pact for the Future", in which it commits (Action 10c) to "Promote sustainable consumption and production patterns, including sustainable lifestyles".

Even the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which since its inception in 1988 has primarily focused on technical assessments and mitigation, devoted an entire chapter of its Sixth Report (2022) to sustainable consumption and **sufficiency.** It estimates that changes in systems of consumption and lifestyles by 2050 can potentially reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40 to 70% (IPCC 2022). A study published in *Nature* went beyond carbon emissions, finding that reducing consumption among just the top 10% or 20% of the world's consumers would go a long way to reducing overshoot of most planetary boundaries, decreasing environmental pressure by 25 to 53% (Tian et al. 2024). The media are also writing about consumption with growing frequency. The detailed and accessible analysis in the 1.5-degree lifestyles reports by Hot or Cool Institute (2022) has been repeatedly featured in mainstream media such as the BBC, Financial Times, The New York Times, Bloomberg News, Forbes, and multiple international and local mainstream media outlets.

Governments are nonetheless averse to abandoning the economic growth paradigm. And for good reason. What remains unresolved is the potential socio-economic impact of rapid reductions in consumption: recession, unemployment, and massive economic dislocations, both among the consumers in the Global North and producers in the Global South. Some scholars have attempted to develop scenarios and macroeconomic models

for such a transition (Victor 2008), but many questions remain open. For instance, all private and public pension plans depend on future growth to deliver on their commitments; in the U.S., meanwhile, much of the public service sector, such as public radio and television, depends on **advertising** revenues for their operating budgets. These examples are just the tip of the iceberg.

After decades of following the neoliberal economic model, national governments are also deeply constrained by the enormous power of multinational corporations, which demand growth and mass consumption (Slobodian 2018). Governments thus cling to the idea that economic growth can continue as long as it is decoupled from resources. Green consumerism and green growth are the operative words. This framing has allowed governments to pay lip service to sustainable consumption while still tacitly or explicitly encouraging mass consumption. They look to technological and market solutions for what is essentially a social and political problem.

5.2 Inequality

As noted earlier, inequality within countries drives consumption because people strive to raise their social status by emulating those "above them". The groundbreaking 2009 and 2019 studies by British epidemiologists Wilkinson and Pickett illuminate other corrosive effects of inequality by showing that it is a powerful social stressor that is increasingly rendering societies dysfunctional. For example, bigger gaps between rich and poor are accompanied by higher rates of homicide and imprisonment, more infant mortality, obesity, drug abuse, and COVID-19 deaths, as well as higher rates of teenage pregnancy and lower levels of child well-being and social mobility.

These findings imply an alternative to economic growth as a way to solve many social ills: reducing inequality. But approaching sustainability from this inequality perspective conjures the spectre of wealth redistribution: a political third rail. This is another great challenge of our times.

Inequality *within societies* has another corrosive effect on the politics of system transition. Reaching broad societal support for action on that scale requires social cohesion and a feeling that everybody contributes their share. But in highly unequal societies, social trust, cohesion, and solidarity are greatly eroded. It is hard to build support for collective action if people feel that the burden is not being shared fairly (Wilkinson and Pickett 2024).

Inequality *between countries* is another unresolved issue. The tension between the rich and poor countries of the Global North and Global South was already evident at the 1992 Earth Summit and continues to clog up global negotiations on who should pay for loss and damage due to impacts of climate change, and the costs of climate mitigation and adaptation.

Although climate change is a consequence of environmental destruction, overconsumption, and historical emissions by the rich countries of the Global North, countries of the Global South are facing its worst impacts.

On top of that, poorer countries are trapped in a neo-colonial and extractive global economic system that is forcing them to use their limited financial and natural resources to continue to supply the rich countries of the Global North, instead of developing their own economies or building their own resilience. Analysis by the International Resources Panel (IRP 2024) shows that, through global trade, rich countries displace environmental impacts onto others, and that rich countries use six times more materials per capita and are responsible for ten times more climate impacts per capita than low-income countries.

In addition to the issue of historical responsibility, the shrinking size of the global carbon budget and the power disparities in international negotiations make changes in energy consumption a zero-sum game: an increase in the Global South requires a decrease in the Global North. In 2017, Hubacek et al. estimated that bringing the 837 million people living in extreme poverty to the level of consumption that is referred to as poor would have a minimal impact on the global carbon budget; but bringing the poor of the world (half of its population) to a more dignified state of existence might raise the global temperature by 0.6 degrees by the end of the century. More recent estimates put the impact of eradicating poverty somewhat lower, but not negligible (Oswald et al. 2021; Baltruszewicz et al 2021; 2023).

Even as climate change forces the need to reduce emissions and as resource stocks dwindle, the International Resources Panel warns that *"Without urgent and concerted action to change the way resources are used, material resource extraction could increase by almost 60 per cent from 2020 levels by 2060…far exceeding what is required to meet essential human needs for all in line with the SDGs"*. Without addressing these tensions between resource needs and availability, and the asymmetries in political and economic power, countries of the Global South are unlikely to meet their material needs, and the Global North would pull the rest of the world into a deeper climate overshoot.

5.3 Envisioning sustainable consumption and lifestyles

Aiming for global carbon equality would mean a radical change in lifestyles in the Global North. What would such a low-impact life look like? In this volume, we include some metaphors that attempt to define it by adopting the idea of minima and maxima: earth systems boundaries (Röckström et al. 2023), **doughnut economics**, **consumption corridors**, and **fair consumption space**. These differ in respective emphases on physical and social factors, equity, justice, and the degree of quantification, but all aim to define

boundaries: the lower boundary ensures dignified, equitable living below which no one should fall; and the upper one defines the biophysical limits that should not be exceeded.

We also include examples of visions – some descriptive, others using quantitative models – of an economy capable of delivering such a life within boundaries: **steady-state economy**, **sharing economy, circular economy, and society** and **foundational economy**. Some papers highlight principles and policies that could form the basis of a society with sustainable lifestyles: **sufficiency** (Princen 2003), for instance, or changing provisioning systems by adopting **universal basic services** for fundamental needs (Gough 2019).

Using theoretical models, some researchers have sharpened the picture of a life within boundaries and under the scenario of equality by producing specific numbers to describe it. In modeling so-called **1.5-degree lifestyles,** they consider factors such as the size of living space, access to basic amenities, sufficient nutrition, basic mobility, and others (Akenji et al. 2021; Oswald et al. 2021; Baltruszewicz et al 2021; 2023). The results all demonstrate a large gap between the current average lifestyles of citizens in affluent societies and lifestyles of sufficiency.

The irony of envisioning and calling for sufficiency lifestyles in wealthy societies is that low-income people in these countries already provide elements of a living model of it (see, for instance, examples from Norway, reported by Korsnes et al. 2024; also Pungas et al. 2024). By necessity, they develop procedures and understandings that support lower consumption levels, like sharing, volunteering, **repairing**, negotiating needs, and calculating costs. Many more examples of sustainable lifestyles, especially in the Global South, can be found in a compendium similar to this one, called *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary* (Kothari et al. 2019).

Notably, the frugality, simplicity, and sharing that are practiced by low-income people are often the same ones that the abundant literature on sustainable lifestyles presents as a model for achieving more life satisfaction through community participation and more leisure time. But this kind of life also often comes with stigmas, a sense of social exclusion, and low social standing – hardly a situation to emulate. This in turn undermines social cohesion and solidarity, which are necessary for social change.

Thus the challenge for policy makers and advocates is to create the conditions under which low consumption lifestyles are the norm, are fair to everyone, and easiest to practice. Efficiency-oriented policies, such as subsidies for heat pumps and electric cars, which work best for economically strong groups, are not up to the task and still have their own environmental impacts. Social activism to bring about value shifts plays a relevant role in sustainability transitions for mainstreaming sustainable lifestyles out of their current niche.

Several concepts explored in this book are relevant for considering how to create such conditions, among them **choice editing, carbon budgets, grassroots innovation, buen vivir and buenos convivires, ubuntu, living labs, eco-communities, and community-supported agriculture**.

6. The need for a common language

A major barrier to making sustainable consumption and lifestyles a high-profile issue is that it does not have a political champion; it is a political orphan. At the time of this writing, the websites of leading global and national environmental organizations do not mention unsustainable consumption or unrestrained economic growth, although inequality is highlighted. This should not come as a surprise. The research roots of the modern environmental movement are in natural sciences and technology; technological and supply-side solutions to ecological overshoot are therefore their natural choices. Furthermore, it is much easier to mobilize their constituency by targeting the business world as villains and human health as under threat – as was the case with environmental pollution from the 1960s on – than by challenging dominant lifestyles (See Box 3). Neither is there much explicit discussion of sustainable lifestyles among advocates for social justice or public health.

Box 3: **Environmental Movement Coalition in the Twentieth Country**

In the United States and Europe, great reforms were introduced in controlling air, water and soil pollution during the early twentieth century, largely owing to the political advocacy of the public health community and, by the 1960s, also environmental organizations. The community of epidemiologists, medical professionals, and environmental scientists that emerged shared a professional language and worldviews. They performed an essential role in generating scientific data about the adverse effects of pollution and chemical contamination on health, disseminated that body of knowledge in scientific publications and mainstream media, and vigorously advocated for government policies.

In the 1960s, they were instrumental in building a broad-based coalition of scientists, environmental activists, and the alarmed public in affecting social change: building regulatory institutions, enacting laws, and allocating public funds (Brown et al. (1997). This same type of coalition was responsible for banning indoor tobacco smoking in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The problem of overconsumption is of course more complex than that of toxic pollution. And consumers who are concerned about their future quality of life are slow to accept the idea of sustainable consumption and lifestyles.

Conceptual barriers to collective action accompany the political ones. The transdisciplinary nature of sustainable consumption and lifestyles research hampers the emergence of a coherent community of scholar-advocates who share a language and worldviews. Suggested points of intervention are often based on fragmented findings and siloed perspectives rather than a unified perspective (Wallnoefer 2022). The result is that people and institutions who should communicate with each other do so poorly or not at all and graduates from sustainability programs who are eager to engage in social activism are often only familiar with a sliver of the big picture but without a good understanding of how all the pieces fit together.

These obstacles do not, however, justify inaction. Indeed, they are a clarion call for action. It is necessary to build a *coalition* of multidisciplinary academics, activists, policymakers, and business leaders who understand the urgency of shifting to a different organizing principle of societal life, and who can see opportunities in doing so. Creating a *broad-based discourse* that draws on the many concepts included in this book is the first step.

We are encouraged by the signs of a growing interest in consumption reduction policies among citizens in high-consuming countries. A recent study in the UK, for instance, showed that citizens are more committed to sufficiency policies than the authors of the National Energy and Climate Plans (Lagea 2023). In France, several recent reports on sufficiency have received considerable public attention (Toulouse 2022). Cities like The Hague are banning fossil fuel-related advertisements, which are a relevant driver of unsustainable consumption. Conversations around degrowth and post-growth approaches have also blossomed, fundamentally questioning what has been called the 'imperial mode of living' (Brand and Wissen 2021). This has brought such debates into prominent conferences in the European Union and national parliaments.

There is also a long tradition and a more recent surge of civil experimentation and activism, quite often not under the banner of sustainable consumption, but very relevant for its development. Many of these are in the lower-consuming countries of the Global South (Kothari et al. 2019). Various promising civil society developments are tackled in the book under topics such as **subvertising, grassroots innovation, alternative hedonism, green parenting, and community-supported agriculture**.

7. Structure of the book

This book seeks to curate and organize a shared vocabulary for the broad, transdisciplinary communities working on a transition toward sustainable consumption and lifestyles, especially in the high-consuming countries. It is also aimed at people who want to better

understand those ideas and how they relate to each other. It strives to assess how far the discipline has matured and to highlight some of the emerging concepts that could become relevant for sustainable futures. Together, the entries in this book attempt to reclaim some of the language from appropriation and greenwashing, and to challenge some myths and misconceptions about sustainable consumption and lifestyles. Ultimately, we hope that it provides inspiration for researchers, practitioners, activists, innovators, and observers on how to collectively move toward a more sustainable society.

The 87 essays are organized into five clusters with overlapping boundaries (see Box 4). Cluster I includes entries focusing mainly on actions by individuals, households, and social groups; Cluster II is more theoretical, including abstract concepts, frameworks, and applied theories. Cluster III takes a political economy perspective; Cluster IV focuses on social activism and value shifts; and Cluster V addresses governance, policy, and choice architecture.

Each entry provides a definition, a brief history of the concept, and a reflection on the various perspectives on the topic, as well as its applications and implications for a transition to a sustainable consumption system. To facilitate cross-referencing between entries, we have marked the connections with other entries in bold. The result is a mosaic of concepts, most of them interconnected, which together form the "Vocabulary" that can be used to have a dialogue on sustainable living, consumption and lifestyles. This mosaic is important not only for a collective conversation but also for identifying leverage points for systemic change. Without a shared understanding of the issues at stake and of the various concepts that matter, it is hard to imagine purposeful social action.

In the entries, we avoided large bibliographies, as would be the case in a review article. This is because we seek to offer the reader a generally understood and self-contained description of each concept in the context of a transition to a system of sustainable consumption and lifestyles. Readers who want to know more about a topic can follow up with further research of their own, starting with the list of five additional readings.

Box 4: Clusters of Concepts

Cluster I: Daily Household Decisions and Lifestyles takes the perspective of the consumer. How and when do consumers make decisions on where to live, how do they get from point A to B, how do they spend their free time, and what do they eat and drink? It also explores examples of sustainable lifestyles, emerging ways of living, and how communities are experimenting, as well as some barriers to change.

Cluster II: Concepts, Frameworks, and Applied Theories brings us to the conceptual underpinnings of sustainable and unsustainable consumption. It explores how lifestyles and consumption patterns are determined by behavioral and structural drivers and barriers, points of intervention to trigger change, and potential outcomes of transformation processes.

Cluster III: Political Economy takes a systemic view of consumer society, including economic structures, the role of finance and money, power relations, and inequality. It reflects on potential types of different economic paradigms, and what principles could be relevant to follow.

Cluster IV: Social Activism and Value Shifts looks at the myriad of social experiments and actions to enhance wellbeing with a smaller footprint. This cluster also reflects on the interpretations of collective wellbeing in different cultures and social contexts, as well as the role of education. It addresses how individuals can take action within and beyond their role as consumers, and what alternative ways of living could serve as orientation for that.

Cluster V: Governance, Policy, and Choice Architecture focuses on institutional arrangements and government policies to facilitate sustainable consumption and lifestyles. This explores how sustainable lifestyles can be enabled through structural, legislative, cultural, and technological changes that default towards mainstreamed sustainable choice options and behavioral patterns.

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Afterword

The wide range of thought and practice covered by the eighty-seven essays in this book make it abundantly clear that consumer society is a complex system of production-consumption. Its many elements are intertwined and mutually dependent, including the structure of the economy and the financial system, major societal institutions, and the built environment as well as social practices, behaviors, beliefs, dominant values, cultural understandings, political ideologies, and power centers, and individual and collective identities. This complexity makes the system resilient in the face of challenges and resistant to any rapid changes.

This complex system underwent explosive growth in the USA after World War II. Driven by business, media indoctrination, and government propaganda, it quickly spread to other parts of the world. Economic growth fueled by consumerism brought unprecedented material prosperity to the Global North, so that any questions about the headlong race into consumerism were outshone by new gadgets and cars, and the sounds of endless construction: of houses, roads, suburbs, oil refineries, and much more. Even the rebellious decade of the sixties did not slow that down.

But we have long known that consumerism in high-income countries has been paid for by borrowing from the future of our children and their children's children; and by exploitation of the low-income countries which supplied cheap labor, fossil energy, food, and minerals. It resulted in massive ecological degradation, much of it in distant locations.

The extraction of wealth by the haves from the have-nots, necessary for maintaining high standards of living and societal peace among the haves, continues. Billions of people around the globe, who were kept from sharing the fruits of consumer society, suffer from its consequences: poverty, unemployment, political instability, violent conflicts, pollution, and climate-related natural disasters. Disenfranchised and prospectless youth the world over are restless. They are abandoning traditions and are attracted to the lifestyles they see on the screens of their TVs and mobile phones. But to enable them to satisfy their basic needs, including consuming more, wealthy societies must consume less.

Despite the high price paid for the affluence of a minority of the global population, delivering well-being is just as elusive today as ever. Social solidarity, democracy, and widespread satisfaction with life in the high-income countries are in decline. Instead, we are witnessing a concentration of political and economic power, mistrust in people and institutions, declining political participation, and alarming rates of mental and physical ill health. The younger generations in high-income countries are anxious about the future. Their elders' prescriptions sound hollow to them: work hard, even at the cost of spending time with family

and friends; compete with your neighbors and friends; accumulate as much wealth and stuff as you can; and do not rock the boat.

We write this Afterword at a time of heightened social divisions and shifts further toward the political right in major global power centers. This includes the polarization of wealth and political discourses, international isolationism, and a decline in climate mitigation and social safety net policies. Global billionaires are grabbing political power in their countries while having more solidarity with each other than with their own nations.

In the meantime, advanced technologies continue to drive consumption, using artificial intelligence and social media. In the US, commerce on social media platforms has more than doubled in the last three years. Most purchases are made by the 18-44 age cohort, who also spend the greatest amount of time online. Other large economies in Europe, China, Australia, and others follow closely behind. The rate of increase in demand for energy surpasses the growth rate in renewable energy supply.

Many visions of a less consumerist future have been published, ranging from abstract to more specific, place-based, and culture-specific. That body of literature is burgeoning. But the question of *how* to transition toward a different organizing principle of social and economic life has been less explored, and even less supported by empirical data.

As we noted in the Introduction (Section 6), the cause of sustainable consumption is a political orphan. In a related scenario, what would happen, for instance, if younger generations collectively reject a consumerist way of life, extreme individualism, and competition? What if they were to look to other cultures and value systems for inspiration? This is not outside the realm of possibilities. The Fridays for Future international climate movement demonstrated that young people can make themselves heard and affect government agendas. Going forward, they could become the engine of changing social norms.

In this volume, we provide a common language for inspiring champions of change around the globe. We translate often-abstract concepts into their sphere of implementation. Our hope is that the vocabulary will create a political space for a discourse about consumption and lifestyles; and be used to grow a coherent movement that rejects consumerist lifestyles.