



Promoting Sustainable Consumption and Production in Asia and the Pacific

Introduction

Over recent decades the Asia and Pacific region has witnessed unprecedented levels of economic growth. This rapid economic growth has produced a significant rise in real wages and has increased the levels of consumption in many countries in the region. However, much of this increased economic growth and increased consumption has been based on environmentally unsustainable, high carbon growth patterns, the effects of which are now ever-more apparent in terms of environmental degradation and climate change. Increased consumption requires increased production, which often leads to the increased depletion of natural resources, more pollution and more waste generation. The effects on the environment have been compounded by continuing population growth and rapid urbanization throughout the region. With 3.9 billion people (two thirds of the global population), 1.5 times the global population density, and the most limited access to natural resources per capita, the Asia and Pacific region faces a plethora of challenges over the coming years. If the conventional economic growth pattern is continued, it is believed that the region will not be able to sustain these levels of economic growth without compromising environmental sustainability. Thus, it is imperative that economic growth be harmonized with environmental sustainability as one of the most important goals for policymakers in the region. Consumption patterns will become increasingly more important over the coming years as the prices of natural resources rise.

Sustainable Consumption and Production

Consumption and production patterns are the driving forces behind any economy and play a significant role in shaping the sustainability of future economic growth. It is important to bear in mind that sustainable consumption does not automatically mean less consumption but rather a more efficient, better informed and less resource intensive consumption. An underlying principle is the need to reduce the ecological impact of consumer patterns and to improve the quality of consumption rather than reduce the quantity of consumption. Sustainable consumption should therefore be understood as a situation where consumer needs and demands are fulfilled in an as efficient and resource lean way as possible. Resulting in minimized negative environmental, social and economic impacts. Thus, the ultimate goal of sustainable



consumption is improved quality of life for all consumers¹. Moreover, the core idea of sustainable consumption and production is to meet our own consumption needs in such a way that we do not deprive future generations' ability to meet their own consumption needs.

At present, the low awareness and understanding of sustainable consumption in the region is hampering this progress towards improving sustainability. Sustainable consumption is not only about meeting the needs of consumers while being environmentally conscious; it is also an important strategy for poverty alleviation, economic growth, health, education and environmental protection. Therefore, sustainable consumption is often not a prescription for how to consume less, but how to meet the consumers' needs in a more intelligent manner.

The Brundtland Commission report in 1987 defined sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'². Sustainable consumption is now considered a major component of sustainable development.

The importance of sustainable consumption patterns however, was not brought to the forefront of the development agenda until the Rio Earth Summit (UNCED) in 1992, where the development of sustainable consumption patterns was incorporated into chapter 4 of Agenda 21. This was further reiterated at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa where the path towards sustainable consumption and production was clearly articulated in chapter III of The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPoI). It states "...to 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."³

The JPoI led to the establishment of the Marrakech Process: a global process to support the

¹ UNEP, 2007, Introduction to Sustainable Consumption in Europe and Asia, <http://www.uneptie.org/scp/nap/pdf/BackgroundSC.pdf> , accessed 6/1/09.

² Brundtland, G. H., 1994, *The Challenge of Sustainable production and consumption patterns at Symposium: Sustainable Consumption*, Oslo.

³ United Nations, Summary by the Co-Chairs of the Meeting, (International Expert Meeting on the 10-Year Framework of Programmes for Sustainable Consumption and Production), Marrakech, Morocco, 2003.



implementation of sustainable consumption and production and the elaboration of a 10-Year framework of programmes (10YFP).⁴ The development of the 10YFP incorporates four phases: organizing regional consultations, building regional strategies and implementation mechanisms, implementing concrete projects and programmes to develop SCP tools and methodologies, and evaluating progress, exchange of information and encouraging international cooperation and coordination. At present the Marrakech Process is developing the implementation mechanism through its Task Forces and cooperation dialogue with development agencies to support national and regional strategies on SCP. There are plans to expand the initiatives throughout the Asia and Pacific region over the coming years.

Sustainable Consumption Policies

A review of the Asian and Pacific development context and environmental sustainability challenges made by ESCAP suggests that the priority areas for action are (a) promoting eco-efficiency in resource use; (b) sustainable “green” procurement in the public sector; (c) food consumption patterns and (d) greening urban transport and buildings.⁵ Most traditional policy tools follow the rational choice model which assumes people assess costs and benefits in a rational way; they include fiscal instruments or market based instruments such as; sanctions (fines and other penalties), price signals (taxes, financial incentives), command and control regulations and educational and political support including the provision of information.⁶ All of these tools can be effectively applied to manage and promote sustainable consumption practices. For most consumers in Asia and the Pacific the price of a product is the single most important factor when deciding what product they purchase. It is therefore important that sustainable products are competitively priced compared to other similar products. Economic tools such as tax breaks, pollution fees, pay-for-return systems, etc. would, if applied, would greatly assist in facilitating a shift towards sustainable consumption.

UN guidelines⁷ on consumer protection recommend governments to take action in nine specific areas: environmentally sound products, services and technologies; recycling programmes for waste and discarded products; regulatory mechanisms; economic instruments; public product information including eco-labeling; impartial testing of products; further research on consumer behaviour; sustainable practices (public green procurement) and

⁴ UNEP, 2007, Marrakech Process on Sustainable Consumption and Production – Project Brief.

⁵ UNESCAP, 2008, Greening Growth in Asia and the Pacific, United Nations Publication, Bangkok, 57.

⁶ Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, Changing Behaviour: A Public Policy Perspective (Canberra, ACT, Australian Public Service Commission).

⁷ UNDESA, 1999, United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection, New York, http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/publications/consumption_en.pdf, accessed 4/1/09.



awareness and public information campaigns.

The ESCAP Second Green Growth Policy Dialogue, held in Beijing in May 2006, underlined the important role that public policy plays in promoting sustainable consumption patterns. Presentations and discussions at the forum pointed out that Governments' roles should include:

- Developing policy frameworks for regulatory standards; infrastructure development and demand-side consumption management;
- Demand side management using appropriate economic instruments and pricing systems;
- Nurturing stakeholder engagement – both with consumers and businesses;
- Promoting sustainable consumption of products and services, via public procurement processes and infrastructure development;
- Re-enforcing the linkages between traditional lifestyles, cultural values and consumption patterns;
- Supporting energy efficiency progress with policies and standards.

Further more in May 2006, ESCAP established the Regional Help Desk on Sustainable Consumption and Production in Asia and the Pacific in partnership with the China Standard Certification Center and UNEP as a centre to disseminate best practices and policy advice to governments in the region.

Life-cycle Analysis

Life cycle analysis is a tool to assess the environmental impacts of product systems and services, accounting for the emissions and resource uses during the production, distribution, use and disposal of a product⁸. It is useful for making the whole production process more efficient and environmentally sustainable. It would benefit consumers substantially if governments could make consumer life cycle analysis resources freely available, maybe through eco-labeling initiatives or product declarations. User-friendly databases and government-approved methodologies that support the use of life-cycle analysis would be particularly beneficial to organizations when planning strategies to improve environmental sustainability⁹. Eco-labeling is also being used as a means to access export markets where the

⁸ Hertwich, E., 2005, Life Cycle Approaches to Sustainable Consumption: A critical review, *Environmental Science and Technology Journal*, Vol. 39, No 13, 18.

⁹ Juniper, C., 2007, 'Whole systems for greater competitiveness of sustainable business' presented at the ESCAP Third Green Growth Policy Dialogue: the Greening of Business and the Environment as a Business Opportunity, Bangkok, Thailand.



consumer awareness is better developed.

Green Public Procurement

The term 'consumer' is often understood as individuals who are consuming products and services, however, companies (manufacturing companies as well as service companies) public and private organizations, including governments are also classed as consumers. Such institutionalized consumers are many times larger than individual consumers and can significantly influence the market for sustainable products and services, even by stimulating the establishment of new markets for sustainable products. It requires a company, organization or the government to carry out an assessment of the environmental impacts of a product at all stages of its life cycle, taking into account the environmental costs of securing raw materials, manufacturing, transporting, storing, handling, using and disposing of the product. Then to select or list the products which minimize environmental impacts.

Public governmental procurement or green public procurement has been cited as one of the key policy recommendations that could be used to change unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. The importance of a strong lead agency within the government, to coordinate national projects and policies for sustainable consumption should also be kept in mind. In many countries, governmental procurement represents as much as 20 to 25 per cent of GDP, and Governments can therefore push for a change towards sustainability in both the producing and consuming sectors. Green public procurement leads to the greening of private procurement through the supply chain. However, only a few countries in the Asia and Pacific region have initiated green procurement policies, for example, Thailand has included green public procurement in to its tenth national economic and social development Plan (2007-2011), the Philippines has passed a Presidential Decree on green procurement, while the Republic of Korea passed the Act on the Promotion of the Purchase of Environment-friendly Products in 2004. Other governments throughout the region would also benefit by instituting such procurement policies. A 2007 survey for OECD countries identified lack of training for public procurement officers as the most important barrier to the implementation of green purchasing policies¹⁰. Government in the region would benefit by increased capacity training for these professionals. Indeed the SINGG plans to actively support governments in the region towards developing green procurement and other sustainability strategies through its pilot projects and leadership programme.

Conclusion

¹⁰ UNDESA, 2008, Public Procurement as a tool for promoting more sustainable consumption and production patterns, Sustainable Development Innovation Briefs, 5.



We are seeing the rise of a global consumer society based on western standards of energy and resource use, while declining poverty rates are giving birth to a rising consumer class. In recent years many countries in the region have seen the purchasing power of many middle and upper class members grow and now have reached parity with the total purchasing power of US consumers¹¹. In fact there are now more middle-to-high income consumers (earning more than US\$ 7000 a year) in Asia and the Pacific than in Western Europe and North America combined. With the stunning rise of both China and India these figures are set to grow even further exacerbating already existing patterns of unsustainable consumption and production. The region is now faced with stark choices, to continue the present unsustainable patterns of consumption and production or to move towards a more virtuous pattern of consumption incorporating energy efficiency and sustainable consumption practices. Voluntary life style changes and new SCP policies are needed if the region is to be able to curtail energy use and thus adopt more sustainable patterns of development.

¹¹ Myers, N., Kent, J., 2003. New consumers: The influence of affluence on the environment. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sciences, USA*, 100 (8).



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N.B. No document emanating from the secretariat should disclaim the views expressed officially in the resolutions of the main organs of the United Nations and in other legislative texts of the Organization such as the Charter of the United Nations and various declarations and conventions.

The few examples provided in this paper serve only to illustrate and inspire and are by no means an exhaustive representation of initiatives in the region. This paper is in draft form and as such the secretariat would welcome any comments and suggestions.