

## Understanding sustainable lifestyles and consumer behaviour



### **P2CS seed project March 2019**

This SEI seed project reviewed the state of the art in sustainable lifestyles and particularly what drives consumer behaviour.

The SEI Initiative on Producer to Consumer Sustainability (P2CS) is an SEI-wide research initiative that connects the sustainable production and sustainable consumption agendas. P2CS explores the links and interactions within production-to-consumption systems – encompassing global flows of commodities and the impacts, dependencies and wider dynamics associated with production and consumption – in order to find new opportunities to enhance their sustainability.

The initiative enters its third implementation phase in 2019.

Unsustainable consumption and production are putting unprecedented pressure on the planet's natural resources and ecosystems. Relieving this pressure requires transforming global production-to-consumption systems. Much research is being done into how different consumption patterns impact the natural world, including under P2CS. But to use that information, and set consumption on more sustainable paths, it is also essential to understand what drives and shapes consumption patterns and consumer behaviours.

This P2CS seed project set out to review the current state of knowledge in this area, in order to boost SEI's capacity to give actionable, effective policy advice on sustainable consumption and lifestyles. The team carried out literature reviews of some of the contemporary research around sustainable lifestyles and consumer behaviour with a focus on high-income country contexts, and on gender aspects of sustainable lifestyles and consumption. The project also assessed needs for SEI's continued work in the field of sustainable lifestyles and consumption, particularly on potential policy measures.

### **Learning**

Changing behaviour is a complex challenge. It has long been recognized that consumer behaviour is influenced by interactions between a range of factors such as pricing, disposable income, technology, marketing of products and innovations, regulations around consumption, and perhaps primarily peers and media. More recently, factors such as personal values, social and cultural norms and habits have also come into focus, whose influence we limited understanding of. When developing strategies for moving to a more resource-sustainable society, awareness of this matrix of factors is essential.

A strong message emerging from the current literature concerns the need to address how such factors promote and support a practice (i.e. a routine behaviour) – referred to in the literature as “organization of practices”. Thus, rather than simply targeting the individual and hoping that they will change their behaviour it may also be necessary to identify and target the factors that promote and support the practice. For example, raising flight taxes has not reduced air ticket sales in a country like Sweden, at least in part because social norms and expectations about holidaymaking are so strong (reinforced by numerous marketing campaigns).

Also important is how infrastructure and institutions can work to shape consumption practices and strengthen increase the feasibility of more sustainable consumption and lifestyles. For

**Photo (above):  
A cargo bike © FOLIO IMAGES / GETTY**

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Holiday flight © NORTH WEST TRANSPORT PHOTOS / FLICKR

example, rather than simply encouraging people to drive less, reducing the number and accessibility of parking spaces, and providing safe, attractive cycle lanes and accessible, well-functioning public transport could help to reduce car driving.

The literature points to the need to think about whole systems and interactions when promoting more sustainable consumption. This is not least to avoid rebound effects that offset the sustainability gains – for example if improvements in energy efficiency lead to lower energy costs, and thus spur higher energy consumption.

The available research attempting to understand the role of gender in consumption is limited but even so offers very diverse conclusions. More nuanced research is needed that takes into account how gender interacts with other factors such as income, family status, culture and social norms, ethnicity, education.

The next step is for SEI to embed the findings from the study into research within and beyond P2CS. This will allow us to better integrate behavioural aspects into our recommendations about policy and strategic plans and will also help inform the development of our consumption-based tools, such as Klimatkalkylatorn.se.

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