

Designing effective policy interventions for sustainable consumption and production: insights from a life-course approach

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Key messages

- There is a lack of consensus about the most promising policy interventions that can be taken to shift towards sustainable lifestyles.
 - The design of policies that can lead to sustainable consumption and production requires greater understanding about the interplay between three forces: consumption, major changes that occur in different phases of life, and the “provisioning systems” (infrastructure, technology and social support, for example) that are available to people.
 - Our research on the use of transport among older adults in Bangkok offers a window into the interplay of these three forces. It shows that significant life events – such a marriage, childbirth, changes in employment, and retirement – lead to changes in the modes of transportation sought and used.
 - Factors such as culture, income and availability of transport information and travel modes can have strong influence on behaviours; for example, our Bangkok research underscores the importance of urban planning for transportation.
 - Using a “life-course approach” that more closely considers such life-stage transitions along with the specific contexts and available support systems can better inform policymaking to help devise bold, effective measures that can help achieve sustainable production and consumption goals.
 - Greater insights into this triad – consumption, the availability of provisioning systems, and the use of a life-course approach – can help develop targeted policy interventions to support working towards sustainable consumption throughout our lives.
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Understanding consumption patterns over the course of one's life

Throughout our lifetimes, we consume goods and services. We make choices every day regarding food, housing, mobility, consumer goods, leisure and services. Our decisions affect how much waste, pollution and greenhouse gas emissions we generate, and how much we deplete natural resources (Gronow & Warde, 2001).

Yet there is little understanding of how patterns of consumption change over the course of our lives. It remains unclear how our consumption habits are influenced by life events, coupled with socio-economic, demographic, and cultural factors and health and well-being needs. The dynamic interplay of these factors with fundamental physical and social services (such as transport, food, housing and healthcare) dictates our consumption patterns. These “provisioning systems” often have complex structures and are locked in to environmentally and socially destructive production patterns that can exacerbate inequality and compound environmental degradation (Cohen, 2019).

Life transitions, such as marriage, parenthood, employment, retirement and relocation, often reshape our social roles and have been seen as offering “moments of change” to encourage shifts towards more sustainable consumption (Burningham & Venn, 2020). However, the evidence regarding the true impact of these life transitions on sustainability is still inconclusive, which calls for more in-depth research into sustainable consumption and production systems across the life course (Cohen, 2019; Vergragt et al., 2014).

Values, climate vulnerability and policy responses differ across demographic groups (Haq, 2021; Schwela, 2021; Ilstedt et al., 2017; Hedlund-de Witt, 2012). Gaining a deeper understanding of these elements is essential to develop targeted policy interventions that support a fair transition towards sustainable consumption and production.

This brief discusses the opportunities linked to using a life-course approach to devise policies to foster sustainable consumption. It considers the potential of life-course transitions to catalyse shifts towards more sustainable consumption. It draws on a study conducted among older adults in Bangkok about their transportation choices and experiences. The work that underpins the brief is part of a wider effort to explore related issues of consumption, lifestyles, and ageing in a low-middle-income setting, and to understand the role that transportation systems can play.

Taking a life-course approach

The life-course concept refers to the interplay between culturally defined stages of life (e.g. childhood, adolescence, adulthood) and the societal and historical context in which that happens (McBey et al., 2019). Within sustainable consumption discourses, there is an increasing interest in life-course transitions. These transitions present pivotal points when individuals can redirect their lives towards more sustainable pathways (Burningham & Venn, 2020). Researchers have explored the potential of life events, such as parenthood, retirement, or relocation, as “windows of opportunity” or “moments of change” for steering behavioural change towards sustainable consumption (Verplanken & Whitmarsh, 2021; Verplanken et al., 2018). Life stages and events serve as variables influencing sustainable consumption patterns.

Research on the effect of marital status and having a child on sustainable consumption has shown mixed results. Notably, interventions aimed at promoting sustainable consumption appear to be most effective when aligned and timed with a life-course transition or shortly thereafter (Verplanken & Roy, 2016). Sustainable consumption research has also explored the role of age as a predictor for consumption behaviour, including specific age groups or generations as a variable (Severo et al., 2017; Mathur et

al., 2008). However, there is no consensus on the correlation between age and sustainable consumption (Haq et al., forthcoming). Rather than narrowing our focus on isolated “moments of change”, we should consider life-course transitions as complex, fluid, temporal processes which depend on financial resources (Burningham & Venn, 2020; Schäfer et al., 2012)

From our case study of older adults in a district of Bangkok, we gained valuable insights into the intricacies of sustainable consumption patterns, particularly within transportation (Haq et al., forthcoming). We found that consumption behaviours are influenced by a confluence of factors, including one’s understanding of sustainable consumption, values, needs and the availability of systems. These factors seem to shift and interact throughout our lifespan, leading to changes in consumption habits. Interestingly, many study participants were unaware that a life event had influenced their consumption behaviours until we asked questions that made them reflect on this.

Among the transformative events that led to different consumption patterns were having children, retiring, moving, and changing jobs. Some respondents linked such life events and shifts, with changes in preferences and demand for certain transportation modes. For instance, taking a new job can force people to change transportation for their commute, with time constraints leading them to switch to or from public transport or private car. Similarly, life events such as marriage or parenthood can lead people to purchase a private car for convenience. The case study suggests that while life transitions can affect consumption practices, other factors, which vary among individuals and contexts, play stronger roles. In Bangkok, for example, the accessibility of different services seemed crucial to determine individual transportation choices, underscoring the significance of urban planning. Other factors that can influence consumption behaviours include information, culture and income.

Examining the role of provisioning systems

Another key influence is accessibility and interaction with provisioning systems, a term defined as “a set of related elements that work together in the transformation of resources to satisfy a foreseen human need” (Fanning et al., 2020, p.3).

These systems, which offer a way to understand connections between social outcomes and research patterns, can be physical (e.g. infrastructure, technology and manufacturing). They can also be social systems (e.g. government, communities and markets). Such provisioning systems vary widely between and within countries because of differences in social and physical and governance structures, economies, and cultures. To better understand the link between resource use and social outcomes, scholars have suggested an analytical framework that illustrates the links between planetary processes and human well-being (Vogel et al., 2021).

How to operationalize the analysis of provisioning systems remains a subject of debate (Olsson and Dawkins, 2022). Existing frameworks present either need-focused approaches (Vogel et al., 2021; Brand-Correa et al., 2020; Brand-Correa & Steinberger, 2017) or system-focused approaches (Plank et al., 2021; Schroeder & Anantharaman, 2017). Scholars argue for the growing need to take a systems perspective when considering sustainable consumption and production (Laakso et al., 2021; Cohel, 2019;

Bengtsson et al., 2018; Tukker et al., 2017; Shibin et al., 2016; Blok et al., 2015; Geels et al., 2015; Vergragt et al., 2014).

In the Bangkok study, we examined how transport as a provisioning system met participants' changing mobility needs over their lifetime. In the Samphanthawong district, for example, walking was the primary means to access shopping and leisure because needed services were nearby. We found that factors such as convenience, travel time, accessibility, and parking availability outweighed environmental concerns in determining transport choices. Financial considerations notably affected public transport use, with interviewees finding the local public transport system mass rapid transit costly, even with senior discounts. This illustrates how individuals' transport preferences shift over time because of factors such as cost and convenience within the provisioning system.

Considerations for designing effective policies

Despite the pressing need, policies addressing the entire spectrum of production-consumption systems are still lacking or ineffective. The opportunities for intervention to change these systems across different contexts and diverse socio-demographic groups are unclear (Vergragt et al., 2014). A better understanding of how socio-economic factors (including underconsumption and poverty) interact with the provision of goods and services is required. The design of future policies on sustainable consumption and production must prioritize long-term sustainability across the life course.

Approaches and issues that warrant attention include the following:

- **Lock-in considerations**

Lock-in refers to the persistent dependence on environmentally damaging products or practices because of existing infrastructure or societal habits, impeding the transition to more sustainable alternatives (Olsson & Dawkins, 2022; Vergragt et al., 2014). For example, there is a need to examine the persistence of dominant consumerist cultures, and socio-psychological aspects that underpin people's behaviour and motivations. Other perspectives to consider are institutional settings, power relationships, political systems and governance systems (Olsson & Dawkins, 2022).

- **Systems thinking and systems transformations**

Systems thinking and systems transformations involve analysing interconnections and complexities within a system to understand how individual components interact and shape the system's behaviour and outcomes. Mont (2019) advocates for systems transformations to stimulate alternative consumption and business models and to explore processes that govern alternative forms of consumption and provisioning. In "Global age-friendly cities: a guide", the World Health Organization provides a framework for provisioning systems to enhance accessibility of essential services and infrastructure for diverse age groups. The framework emphasizes inclusive designs such as accessible public transportation options, and social and healthcare facilities;

these contribute to residents' well-being and social inclusion within provisioning systems.

- **Sustainable consumption targeting**

Targeted policies that emphasize sustainable consumption can facilitate both efficient technology uptake and behavioural change. There is a call for policies to include strong sustainable consumption considerations that emphasize absolute reductions in consumption levels (Schroeder & Anantharaman, 2017).

Conclusions

More effective policy interventions are needed to work towards sustainability goals and ensure that transitions are fair. A better understanding of sustainable consumption approaches in different socio-economic and cultural contexts can help achieve these aims. Daily consumption patterns are affected by our immediate surroundings and by broader infrastructural and socio-economic settings (Burningham & Venn, 2020). To intervene in effective ways, policymakers must address these multiple parts of the wider system (Olsson & Dawkins, 2022).

They must:

- address social, cultural, material, and economic aspects of the system; and
- ensure integrative and cross-sectoral policies.

These elements should be examined within existing systems, relationships, feedback and power structures from a life-course perspective. Further research is needed to better understand the different contexts in which people are undergoing life-course changes, the variations of consumption within different categories (e.g. food and clothing), and the relationships among different socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, income level, education, and ethnicity, each of which can shape how individuals experience transitions in their lives. Only with this understanding can we effectively harness life-course transitions as pivotal points for more targeted policy design. Future work should explain how provisioning systems can meet changing needs over the life course. Greater insights into this triad – consumption, the life course and provisioning systems – can help develop targeted policy interventions to ensure sustained sustainable consumption throughout our lives.

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