Living sustainably: approaches for the developed and developing world

Michael Redclift and Emma Hinton

Michael Redclift is professor of international environmental policy in the Department of Geography at King’s College, London. In 2006 he was the first recipient of the Frederick Buttel Award, from the International Sociological Association, for “an outstanding contribution to international scholarship in environmental sociology”. He is the author of Frontiers: Histories of Civil societies and Nature, published by MIT Press in 2006, and Chewing Gum: the Fortunes of Taste, published by Taylor & Francis in 2004.

Emma Hinton is completing a PhD in the Department of Geography, King’s College, London. She has a degree in environmental science and considerable experience of working both in government and in the NGO sector in the United Kingdom. Her current research, which is funded under an ESRC/DEFRA award, is on sustainable consumption.
Living sustainably: approaches for the developed and developing world

Introduction
The original title of this paper—What domestic policies might enable us to live more sustainably, while helping the developing countries to improve their living standards without causing excessive damage to their environments?—assumes a degree of similarity and convergence between ‘developing countries’. Is this plausible in the wake of China and India’s economic emergence on the world stage? It is not clear, either, whether “helping” developing countries is either practicable or desirable, and what “our” role might be. Should it be concentrated in health and education policy (where it might be most useful), or extend to lessons in economic development? The question makes a number of assumptions.

The paper does not examine the costs and benefits of making large-scale structural changes in the global economy (via WTO/Doha, economic partnership agreements, accelerated debt cancellation etc). Some or all of these changes may be necessary before the second part of the question can be addressed adequately.

This paper is structured as follows: the first half introduces analytical perspectives on both globalisation and sustainable consumption, touching on critiques of current policies; and the second half suggests how we might begin to resolve some of the tensions between globalisation and sustainability. We finish with a summary of policy recommendations.

Part one: analytical perspectives on globalisation and sustainable consumption

Globalisation
However defined, globalisation is clearly a concept that is widely seen to characterise the contemporary era—and to mark out what is distinctive about it. A partial list of reasons why it is seen to be important today is provided by Held (2004):

1. **Stretched social relations**: Economic as well as political and cultural processes are increasingly “stretched” across national borders—events in one part of the world impact swiftly on another and with greater frequency than before.
2. **Intensification of flows**: More flows and networks encompassing more people in shared social spaces distinct from traditional territorial (and state-linked) sense of space: work, leisure, etc.
3. **Increasing interpenetration**: Here, economic and cultural practices become intertwined in complicated patterns across the globe (and not reducible to old argument of western “neo-colonialism”).
4. **Global infrastructure**: Global institutions are involved in economic or political governance, but also information and communications technologies that underpin global markets, and are independent of national authorities.

---


---

2. Living sustainably | Michael Redclift and Emma Hinton | April 2008
Among the “hyper-globalists,” a number of fundamental economic changes are said to support their case:

- **Growing international trade**: Lowering of national trade barriers, greater competition and globally-oriented consumption tastes;
- **Increasing foreign direct investment**: Rapid growth in new investments, mergers and acquisitions and technology transfers;
- **Accelerated technological change**: Joseph Schumpeter’s “creative destruction” of old ways of doing things leads to accelerated cross-border flows—for example transportation, electronics and bio-engineering;
- **Rapid global communications**: Internet, mobile phones, conventional media (e.g. 24-hour “breaking” news channels);
- **Increasing labour and leisure-related mobility**: Temporary or permanent migration drawn from all economic classes binds places and people together as never before; international tourism.

“Preference accommodation” and “spaces of intention”

The current UK Labour policy agenda for sustainability rests upon certain ideological and epistemological foundations (Seyfang 2004-2), producing a “privileged narrative” (Hobson 2002) that seeks to achieve sustainability at arm’s length (Hobson 2004). While Labour’s “third way” paradigm sees responsibility for sustainability as the mutual obligation of citizens and state, sustainability has instead been steered through policy networks, trusts and market mechanisms rather than coming from government itself (Hobson 2004). She argues that this approach results from the Labour government’s ideological commitment to make globalisation “work for the people” through increased consumer choice and reduced regulation, where policy accommodates business demands rather than vice versa (a process known as preference accommodation).

Sustainable consumption is often framed as a public knowledge problem (Hobson 2002, Seyfang 2004-4), with policy approaches based on voluntary consumer information campaigns; and public participation has become a key component of the official discourse. An implicit assumption is that environmental problems have immediate resonance with individuals; individuals are assumed to either want to become “greener” but do not know what to do, or simply learn environmental facts, which then awakens a latent sense of environmental responsibility (Hobson 2006-2). A variety of social scientists working on consumption have critiqued models of behaviour change that underpin sustainable development strategies, arguing that a reliance on information advances has impoverished the debate, and simplistic representations of consumption behaviour have incorrectly portrayed individuals as rational actors.

The current policy approach identifies motivated consumers and market transformation based on individual consumer preferences as the unit of activity (Seyfang 2006); “the normative and economic overtones of Labour’s approach, despite talk of sustainable communities, appear to cut out scales of action other than that of the rational individual” (Hobson 2004, p. 135). But this
positioning of the individual as the locus of activity has been attacked as unfair, pitting individuals against global institutions to solve global problems (Seyfang 2004-4), and has been branded a “form of social control through self-discipline” (Hobson 2002, p. 113).

The problem is compounded by a difficulty in providing quantitative indicators for changes in environmental quality and human wellbeing. What gets measured counts; GDP doesn’t consider quality of life, and neither does most economic policy. An alternative advocated in Agenda 21 and only recently re-emerging in policy critique (egs SDC 2006, New Economics Foundation) is the idea of an alternative accounting mechanism to prioritise wellbeing over material accumulation, eg a Measure of Domestic Progress (Seyfang 2004-4, Jackson 2005). In the meantime, government has proved unwilling to stimulate wide public debate and action about new forms of “quality of life”, crafting instead a series of policies that aim to achieve “sustainability by stealth”, introducing modest policy changes that do not question prevailing lifestyles and consumption expectations (Robins 1999).

It has been argued that the UK “strategy” is biased towards individualistic, market-based and neo-liberal policies, and takes as its premise an imagined “rational individual calculator” (Seyfang 2004-1). As McManus suggests, “politically acceptable policies for sustainability would be ecologically ineffective, while ecologically meaningful policies remain politically impossible” (McManus 1996, p. 68). In concentrating on efficiency rather than consumption, policymakers stick close to a politically safe position, providing information and advice but not going so far as to tell consumers and decision-makers how to live their lives. The result is a somewhat technocratic approach that fails to engage with what our needs are and how they are constructed and reproduced, both through the physical and social infrastructure (Shove 2006) and through the policy discourse. Seyfang (2004-4) argues that sustainable consumption would be more likely to be achieved if government acted to shift societal values, publicly questioning the rationale of continuing economic growth, and forcing firms to take action rather than relying on corporate, consumer-driven self governance.

Lundqvist (2001) also argues for efforts to naturalise ecological evaluations just as economic rationales have been naturalised in the public mind, finding a new role for the state as a “green fist in a velvet glove”. Others recommend the development of shared visions and approaches among a range of stakeholders and the public, realigning a wider range of policies, from employment law to trade (Michaelis 2003-1) and addressing the institutionalisation of increasingly resource-intensive ways of life (Hand, Southerton & Shove 2003). McGregor (2001) calls for a new participatory consumerism which would make apparent the oppression and market myths created by free-market proponents.

Finally, the awareness that many individuals are motivated by ethical considerations in their consumption choices has prompted a debate about the “spaces of intention” that underlie ethical decision-making in a number of fields, notably tourism, food provisioning and personal investment. The rise of “ethical” consumption (corporate social responsibility etc) has also fuelled
a discussion of the spatial implications of consumer behaviour and consumer intentions (Bryant, Goodman & Redclift 2008, in press).

**Beyond “preference accommodation”**

*Alternative lifestyles*

Despite the attention given to changing our lifestyles and ideas about the quality of life at Rio, discourses around alternative lifestyles have tended to be marginalised as a result of political support for the eco-efficiency agenda, resulting in its mainstreaming in the discourses of sustainability. The efficiency discourse has been totalising, even beginning to appropriate alternative discourses, for instance eclipsing other aspects of sustainability in discussions of shared services (Halme, Jasche & Sharpe 2004). Institutional and socio-cultural barriers have also been cited as factors in the limited attention paid to alternatives (Mont 2004). While it is within the realm of political possibility that policies which confront these barriers will be developed, the failure to do so ensures that eco-efficiency is the only feasible kind of sustainability to be addressed. There are still, however, some calls for social innovations in lifestyles and cultures to accompany such techno-centric solutions (eg Green & Vergragt 2002, Michaelis 2003-3).

Voluntary simplicity (comprising down shifters, strong simplifiers and the simple living movement (Etzioni 2006)) is a choice to live a simpler lifestyle, and is often denigrated in the literature as being irrelevant and the choice of an affluent few (Robins & Roberts 2006). An international study spanning continents, decades and methods (Librova 1999) found that participants tended to be relatively affluent, well-educated, engaged in wide social networks, with altruistic beliefs who consume alternatively in order to set themselves apart from the majority. The voluntary simplicity movement is often presented as the sole manifestation of anti-consumerism in the literature; however, there exists a profusion of alternative campaigns that set out to challenge the negative stereotyping of consuming less through subversive advertising, humour, theatre and art (Robins & Roberts 2006), including AdBusters campaigns like “buy nothing day” with its array of themed events worldwide.

*Eco-localism*

Another marginalised discourse is that of the local economy movement or “eco-localism”, which posits that economic and environmental sustainability can be secured by the creation of local or regional community economies. Building on the principles of Local Exchange Trading (LETS) schemes, it seeks to strengthen mutual indebtedness, rather than individual profit. Indebtedness to neighbours and community is seen, within this lens, as a way of enhancing social capital and increasing, paradoxically, individual’s personal comfort zone. Eco-localism includes local currencies, community corporations and banks, food co-ops, micro-enterprise, farmers’ markets, permaculture, community supported agriculture, car sharing schemes, barter systems, co-housing and ecovillages, home-based production, localist business alliances, time banks, mutual aid and regional food economies (Curtis 2003).

Eco-localism has emerged in opposition to the hegemony of neo-liberalist and mainstream thought. It promotes a localised economic space, in contrast to an ever-expanding scale of
ecological modernisation" usually refers to economic and social changes which seek to internalise environmental externalities, producing greener products and services. The policy focus on environmental technologies falls within this frame of reference. See, for example Hajer 1995, Hajer 1996, Leroy & Van Tatenhove 2000, and Mol 1997.

However, eco-localism has problems attached to it. Locally produced goods are likely to carry higher prices, pushing this kind of alternative consumption out of the reach of the less affluent; and only a limited number of goods can be produced locally thus necessitating inter-local bartering and effectively de-localising the economy. Finally, local currency schemes do not interface well with tax and benefit systems (Seyfang 2004-4); and eco-localism, like mainstream approaches to sustainable development, relies on the majority of the population endorsing non-materialist values, which psychological and sociological studies suggest is unlikely.

Inequality and mainstream policy on the environment
Most importantly, the mainstream “sustainability” discourses fail to address inequality. “Sustainable development” policies may conflict with the social and economic wellbeing of groups and communities (Burningham & Thrush 2001). Leaving the market to control the prices of “green” products tends to make them more expensive and less accessible than less sustainable alternatives (Seyfang 2004-4). This places much of mainstream ethical consumption behaviour out of the reach of the financially disadvantaged consumer, who is less able to make long-term savings investments like those associated with solar power, for instance (Steedman 2003, Holdsworth & Steedman 2005).

“Stronger” sustainable development policy, involving alternative lifestyles and the notion of consuming less, is more compatible with equality but more incompatible with the status quo. The benefits are felt in terms of social solidarity, and a renewed sense of the purpose of work, rather than the purchase of ever increasing volumes of ethically-vetted commodities.

Some policies to affect a transition towards greater accommodation between the market and the environment, such as “ecological modernisation”, have become increasingly mainstream, while others have become marginalised. Why have some discourses become privileged? Energy efficiency has become one of the most privileged of narratives, possibly as a result of the concerted research effort dedicated to the production of innovative, energy efficient technology during the oil crises in the 1970s and 1990s. More recently a new international language of climate change has privileged carbon above all other environmental impacts in the dominant discourse, and now both policymakers and NGOs have attempted to tailor their sustainability or environmental efforts in order to jump on the “carbon bandwagon” and thereby maintain credibility and gain access to scarce funding sources.

Waste and water are other strategic discourses, where policy alternatives are highly contested. They are industries which require the compliance of the UK government, as a result of European
legislation to which the UK has signed up, as well as the prior existence of much of the infrastructure required to implement change, in the form of the UK Environment Agency. It is also notable that attempts to raise the thresholds for sustainable practice in some policy areas—notably energy and water policy—create problems for government/citizen relations in the UK, because public perceptions that they are “natural monopolies” cannot easily be accommodated to a business model, and this model sits uneasily with demands for greater public compliance. This may be one legacy of the early privatisation of these utilities and the failure to include environmental factors in the public service when they were nationalised industries.4

Other policy approaches remain at the margin, despite an apparent “hunger” for new points of departure and evidence of “spaces of intention”, illustrated by the growth of interest in fair trade, ethical consumption, and the almost pathological search, on the part of some charities, for the endorsement of celebrities.

Part two: reconciling globalisation and sustainability

Towards a more “inclusive” globalisation?

How do we satisfy this new hunger for genuinely new points of departure for policy, which, while recognising globalisation as a background reality, also seeks to shape its effects in ways that are more in keeping with robust social democratic and green traditions? One answer is to revisit globalisation itself. It might be assumed that an “inclusive” globalisation carries most of the benefits of globalisation, without the obvious costs to individuals and communities. The following are suggestions for ways forward, out of the impasse:

Political steerage

We need to decide what we want the state to do, rather than simply “roll it back” because of ideology or political and financial expediency (the private finance initiative). If government is to set the political agenda, then government has to govern. Much of the resistance to “the state” today is resistance to bureaucracy and apparent lack of accountability, rather than resistance to government getting on with the business of governing. As far as environmental policy is concerned this means clearly establishing the role of both regulation and markets, in the mind of citizens (and “consumers”) as well as “experts”. Policy needs to explain the logic of the “mix” and the benefits of a mixed approach.

There are various examples of policies which at first appeared fringe-like or eccentric which have already gained very wide acceptance. They suggest it is possible to govern decisively while negotiating for international compliance and wider agreement.5 Moves towards mainstreaming sustainable behaviour are only possible within situations of strong policy control (light bulbs in European policy, and congestion charging in London policy). Policy initiatives towards the developing countries with high rates of economic growth might also offer assistance in fields such as energy policy and transport, rather than focusing on the supposed benefits of economic competitiveness and gains from trade.

4. There is considerable unease in many local authority areas with the move towards alternate weekly collections of waste and recyclable materials. Similarly, the UK is (unusually) a latecomer to water metering (except in new-build), compared with our EU partners.

5. For example, recent moves to ban inefficient light bulbs suggest that government is taking the lead to ban the manufacture and sale in the UK of incandescent light bulbs by 2010 on the back of NGO campaigns and EU legislation. However, incandescent bulbs will still be available outside Europe—so this is where globalisation needs to come in, we need to negotiate a global ban on certain products. Similarly, the congestion charge in London, which has seen massive increases in public transport use and decreased car reliance, and the new proposals to stagger the charge depending on vehicular emissions, has only been possible as a result of one local council having different powers from the rest of the country.
We also need to move towards establishing new norms for valorising “living with little/less”. There is accumulating evidence that a high quality of life can be acquired without high levels of personal consumption, in terms of disposable income, and that wellbeing has more to do with integrating systems of social support, and increased personal security, than with consuming more (Goodland, Daly & Serfey 1992). Might it be the case that achieving greater sustainability, and hold over our fragile environments, is best served not by working harder to consume more but by working less, earning less, consuming less and spending less? Moves towards mainstreaming sustainable behaviour are only possible when there is strong policy control and an example of good practice to hand, rather than an invitation to emulate resource profligacy. Examples might be moves to ensure that crops like soya, which compromise ecosystems, and have damaging secondary effects (in both north and south), are actively discouraged by the UK government within global policy regimes.

Proclaim benefits

Many new areas of environmental policy and sustainable provision are “win-win” areas, but the benefits of acting along “least cost” lines are not proclaimed in easily understood terms. Often, lowering prices for lowered consumption (water, electricity) has several clear benefits as well as costing consumers less. The relationship between consumption, environmental externalities and costs to the consumer becomes more transparent.\(^6\) For utility companies the reduction in resource use can mean that future investment costs are reduced, too, in smaller plants. Incentives need to be devised which actively encourage more sustainable provision, with returns for both business and the citizen. Lower household expenditure on environmental goods (energy, waste, food, transport etc) encourages a different mind-set from the dominant view that “activity on the high street” needs to be encouraged at all costs. A long-term, community conscious and more sustainable mind-set is frequently evoked in political (and government) literature, but is rarely encouraged in practical terms on the ground.

Public culture

Finally we need to “naturalise” the sustainability rationale, in much the same way as the economic/business rationale was naturalised after 1980. This involves at least two steps:

1. To establish the monetary and non-monetary costs of not taking strong sustainability measures, and to communicate these as a matter of urgency and precaution, simultaneously being mindful to avoid sensationalism and a specialist “science” discourse, since these two factors can have a negative impact on the public.

2. A start could be made by demonstrating the international and mutual gains from exchange of knowledge over trade and the environment, and the need to “join-up” the two fields through government-led initiatives. For example, recent interesting initiatives on “fair trade” and ethical consumption throughout western Europe have largely taken place without strong government activity, and in the context of a kind of alternative hedonism. The links between consumers of industrialised food, protectionist agricultural policies in the European Union, and soya producers in Argentina and Brazil, could be the subject of policy initiatives and public debate that extends beyond the contours of interested NGOs, and in which government took a lead.

\(^6\) The government has, for a number of years already, had an agreement with energy suppliers called the Energy Efficiency Commitment whereby energy suppliers must achieve carbon reduction targets in domestic energy efficiency. The new phase which starts in March and runs until 2011 will add micro-generation, biomass community heating and combined heat and power to the energy efficiency measures of the current EEC energy suppliers have tended to meet their commitments by giving out free low-energy light bulbs and offering discounted loft and cavity wall insulation.
“Aspirational” behaviour

Another important move would be to take seriously peoples’ aspirational interest in the environment, and to place it at least on an equal footing with the aspiration to increase household income. This might be acknowledged through advertising the intergenerational benefits of measures to improve the environment and sustainability now, including the issue of government “sustainability” bonds (on the model the government pioneered for income bonds for new born babies).

How would these principles and policy suggestions change our responsibilities to the developing world?

There are three conditions without which participatory governance can have little effect: a strong state, a well developed civil society, and an organised political movement, such as a political party (Gaventa 2004). However, attempts to “encourage” these conditions in the developing world are fatally flawed since the northern industrial powers cannot separate their professed interest in good governance from their economic and strategic interests (cf the Iraq war). Interventions stem from our continued drive for economic growth around hydrocarbons. If we re-conceptualise “national wealth”, we might begin to de-couple interventions from material interests in another state’s resources.

The single biggest problem for the industrialised world in its dealings with the global south is that it always strives for universal solutions to environment and development “problems”. Development policy has followed a series of “buzz words” and fashions—“basic needs”, “betting on the strong”, “participatory appraisal” etc. In most cases these “methodologies” ignored the fields of knowledge in the receiving country and were sown regardless. The latest paradox is the fate of methodologies of social inclusion, most of which have been parachuted into visibly unprepared cultures. The effect of providing methodologies of inclusion has been to exclude most beneficiaries of change. This is the burden of the argument put forward by recent work on local governance and social mobilisation in the south (Waddington & Mohan 2004, Hyden 1997, Mohan & Stokke 2000, Gaventa 2004, Fung & Wright 2001, Mohan & Hickey 2004).

From the viewpoint of “spaces of intention” there is an impressive amount of affective concern in the north, cultivated by NGOs and demonstrated by themed rock concerts and celebrity endorsements. However, the policy discourse rarely focuses on viewing wealth as wanting little rather than having a lot. There are clear gains in reversing previous approaches and viewing climate change policy as the driver of social change, rather than an obstacle in the way of social advances. Similarly we might view human and environmental security as a goal of global governance. As the bigger economies of the south develop economically, more of their environmental problems are shared with the north, so a first step would be the admission that we have at least as much to learn as to teach.
References


Burningham, K. & Thrush, D. 2001, Rainforests are a long way from here: the environmental concerns of disadvantaged groups, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.


Living sustainably: approaches for the developed and developing world

Michael Redclift and Emma Hinton